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A Key to Couple Satisfaction: A Comparison of Equality in Domestic Work in Spain and Sweden

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Despite advances in gender equality in the public sphere, the division of domestic labour remains unequal inside households. This situation can create wellbeing—or discontent—in couples, especially among women. In this number of *Perspectives Demogràfiques*, we analyse data from Spain and Sweden when exploring how men and women perceive the distribution of domestic tasks and the degree of satisfaction they show in this regard. The present study is the result of a joint project of researchers from the Centre for Demographic Studies (CED-CERCA) of the Autonomous University of Barcelona¹ and from Stockholm University who have compared data from two nationally representative surveys: the 2018 Fertility Survey (Spain) and the 2021 Generations and Gender Survey (Sweden).

Two research questions guide this study. The first is, how do men and women in the two countries perceive the division of household tasks? The second is, how do levels of satisfaction vary depending on the type of division and country of reference? Differences by gender, age, and country are analysed as is the interaction between the type of distribution of tasks and the satisfaction reported. The initial results clearly show that perception of equality in the distribution is associated with greater satisfaction for both genders and in both countries. Conversely, when there is an imbalance, women—especially in Spain—report lower satisfaction than men. The data also indicate that younger couples perceive a more equal distribution but this does not necessarily imply either convergence between the countries or greater satisfaction when there is imbalance.

Dissatisfaction and domestic inequalities: a comparison between northern and southern Europe

The “doing gender” theory (West and Zimmerman, 1987) describes how social norms define what is expected of women and men. These expectations mean that household tasks are generally associated with the female role and that people adapt to this even when they consider it unfair. This depends not only on individual choices but also on the social environment and the institutions that shape them. Studies show that in societies with more gender equality, people are more aware of inequalities in the home and are less tolerant of unequal distribution of domestic tasks (Hu and Yucel, 2018).

At the European level, the northern model tends to be compared with the southern one. In the present study, we compare a northern country, Sweden, with a southern country, Spain. We use two comparable data sources, the 2021 Generations and Gender Survey (Sweden) and the 2018 Fertility Survey (Spain) when focusing on heterosexual couples to compare perceptions of men and women in relation to whether they consider that there is an equal distribution of domestic tasks in the couple and, furthermore, whether they are satisfied with this distribution. In the case of the first aspect, each interviewee’s individual perception of how housework is divided with his or her partner is recorded. We classify their responses into three groups: when tasks are shared equally, when the woman does most of the work, and when the man does most of the work. The second aspect of satisfaction with the distribution is measured on a ten-point scale where 0 represents complete dissatisfaction and 10 represents complete satisfaction. Figure 1 shows, by gender and country, distribution of household tasks and average satisfaction resulting from this situation.

Perceptions of the division vary by gender and country. Swedish men perceive the highest levels of equality (65%) while Spanish women report the greatest imbalance (with only 23% perceiving equality). Swedish women, with only 57% perceiving an equal balance, are also less positive than their male counterparts. In Spain, 29% of men consider that household tasks are equally shared. Accordingly, the perception that “she does more” is higher in Spain and, for both men and women, the proportion exceeds that observed

1. This text belongs to the project PID2023-148209OB-I00 “Patrones educativos y trayectorias de actividad laboral y empleo del tiempo de la población de 50-59 años” (Educational Patterns and Trajectories of Labour Activity and Time Use in the Population Aged from 50 to 59 Years), which is co-funded by MICIU/AEI/ 10.13039/501100011033 and NextGenerationEU EU/PRTR.

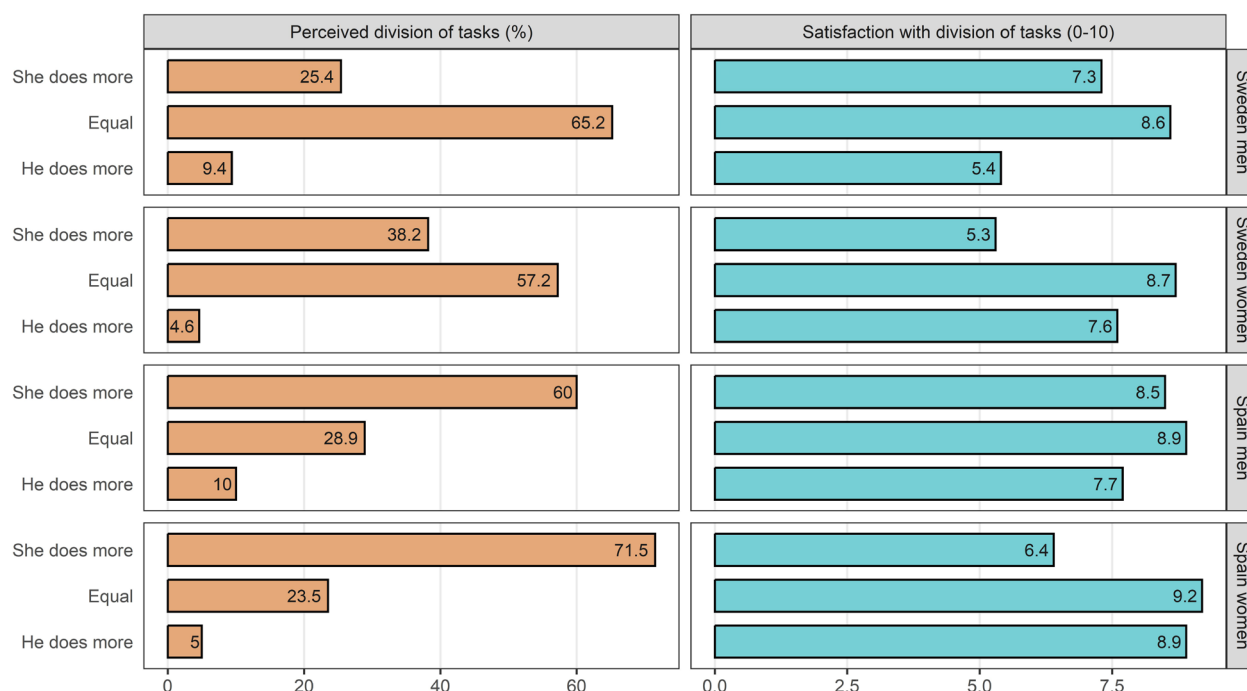


Figure 1. Distribution of domestic tasks (percentage) and degree of satisfaction with the distribution (score) by gender and country: heterosexual couples aged 18-55

Source: Authors using data from the Spanish Fertility Survey (INE, 2018) and the Swedish Generations and Gender Survey (SUDA, 2021).

in Sweden by about 35 points. Couples where the man does more housework represent a very small percentage in all groups.

Despite the difference between men and women, the results show a shared pattern. The highest level of satisfaction is found in households where distribution is equal, in both Sweden and Spain (around 9 points higher). By contrast, the greatest dissatisfaction is observed in couples that show significant imbalances, especially for both sexes in Sweden and for women in Spain. In terms of unequal distribution of household tasks, Spanish men (8.5 points) are much more satisfied than Spanish women (6.4 points). The gap is similar in Sweden where men who do less than their partners express a notable degree of satisfaction (7.3 points) while women who do almost all the housework show a lower figure (5.3 points). In short, the best way to achieve high satisfaction, among both men and women and in the north and the south, is to share household tasks equally.

Division of domestic work by age

Since the data we use are cross-sectional (corresponding to a single observation in time), it is not possible to observe changes over any one person's lifetime. An indirect way to analyse possible generational changes is to compare groups by age and, here, perception of balance in the division of domestic tasks shows a fairly clear pattern that is shared by

gender and country: the younger the couple, the more tasks are perceived to be equally shared (Figure 2).

Although there is progress among the younger generations, no convergence is seen between domestic models in Sweden and Spain. The data show that, whatever the age, Swedish couples report greater equality than their Spanish counterparts, and that men declare greater equality than women. Moreover, in younger groups, the gender gap is particularly marked. In both countries, younger men perceive a more equal distribution score, which is 15 points higher than that for women of the same age. In other

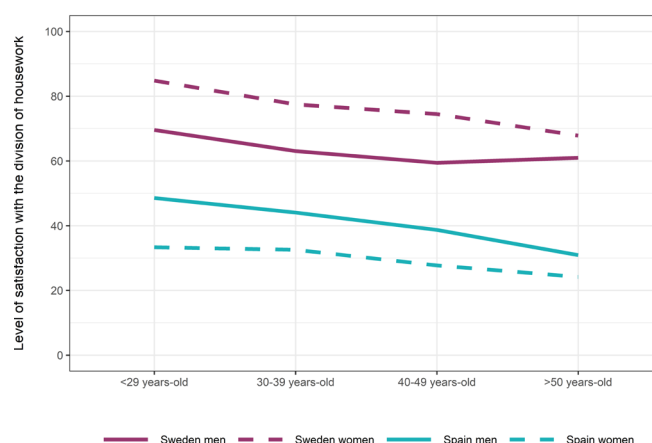


Figure 2. Pattern by age in perception of equality in distribution of domestic tasks, by country and gender (%)

Source: Authors using data from the Spanish Fertility Survey (INE, 2018) and the Swedish Generations and Gender Survey (SUDA, 2021).

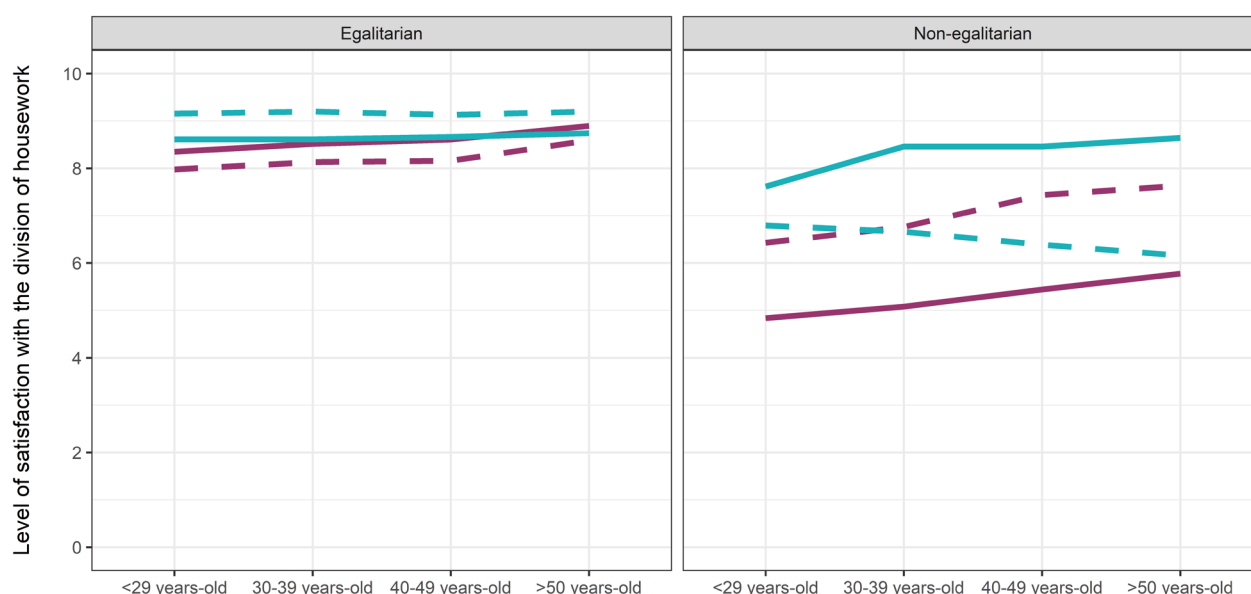


Figure 3. Pattern by age of satisfaction with distribution of household tasks according to type of division, country, and gender (%)

Source: Authors using data from the Spanish Fertility Survey (INE, 2018) and the Swedish Generations and Gender Survey (SUDA, 2021).

words, above and beyond differences between countries and genders, age plays a significant role in perception of domestic division of labour.

In short, regardless of location and gender, the younger the population, the more equal distribution of household tasks is perceived to be. However, this conclusion does not answer the question of whether this is an age effect (couples change over time) or a generation effect (younger generations have grown up with more egalitarian values, which remain unchanged). The latter assumption would suggest significant cultural change.

Satisfaction with division of domestic labour by age

With regard to satisfaction with division of domestic work, the pattern by age varies in accordance with the type of perception of equality. In this section where we aim to analyse the pattern that is at odds with the prevailing norm (homes where the woman does the greater share of domestic work), we consider both equal division of housework and situations where men report doing the greater share of domestic work. People who report an equal division of labour show very high levels of satisfaction at all ages, with few differences between countries and genders (Figure 3). In this group, levels of satisfaction exceed 8 points in all cases and rise to 9.1 among young Spanish women.

By contrast, with the exception of Spanish women, among people who perceive an unbalanced distribution, the

youngest are the least satisfied. In Sweden, men show a clear increase with age, from 6.4 points at the age of 29 to 7.6 points after the age of 50. Nevertheless, Swedish women show lower levels for all ages, from 4.8 to 5.7 points, with a slight increase among older women. The contrast is more marked in Spain. Men report high levels of satisfaction with unbalanced distribution, and this increases with age (from 7.6 to 8.6 points), while women show an opposite pattern. The older they are, the less satisfaction they express with scores ranging from 6.7 among the youngest to 6.1 among the oldest. These figures support the idea that, beyond the type of distribution of household tasks, age also influences degree of satisfaction, but does so differently depending on the country and gender.

However, there are two possible explanations for these differences. Either people's perceptions and degrees of satisfaction change over the course of their lives (age effect) or the younger generations have more egalitarian expectations, which persist over time (generational effect). In a context where people form couples later in life, equality in the division of domestic tasks could act as a criterion of choice among younger women with egalitarian values. It is therefore possible that younger women who agree to less co-responsible living arrangements do so for reasons of tolerance or contextual adaptation, but also because of a lack of alternatives. The lower levels of satisfaction observed in older age groups could reflect not only a change of perception over time but also a persistence of relationships where the domestic imbalance is the norm or made invisible. This indicates the extent to which gender



norms continue to set limits of shared responsibility and everyday wellbeing. In any case, even within each group (egalitarian and non-egalitarian), satisfaction varies with age and context. This suggests that, in addition to the type of distribution, other age-related factors like expectations, adaptation, and generational context could also have an influence.

Conclusions: Equality in the home is confirmed as a key factor of wellbeing in couples

The results clearly show that, independently of gender, there is a higher perception of equality in Sweden than in Spain. However, in both countries analysed, an equal distribution of household tasks is associated with greater satisfaction among both women and men. Equality in the home is confirmed as a key factor in the wellbeing of couples.

Even so, perceptions of the division of labour and levels of satisfaction vary according to gender, country, and age. Women are more critical in their perception of household equality and report lower levels of satisfaction when there is imbalance. However, men, especially in Spain, tend to show higher levels of satisfaction, even in situations of unequal distribution of household tasks.

As for age, young couples perceive greater equality although it is unclear whether this is due to changes over the life cycle or generational differences. Satisfaction also varies with age when the division is not equal. In Sweden, it increases over the years for the entire population while, in Spain, it rises among men but decreases among women. When the division of tasks is equal, effects of age and gender do not affect satisfaction.

Overall, the data suggest that household equality is not only a matter of fairness in the couple but it also reveals structural tensions between gender, work, and wellbeing. The fact that women are more critical of imbalance and less satisfied with this situation reflects not only unequal expectations but also the persistence of a patriarchal system that renders their work invisible and legitimises men's "auxiliary" contribution in the home. This reproductive labour is still essential to sustaining the economic system, and its unequal distribution shows how the private sphere reproduces the social order. Achieving a fairer distribution of domestic work would not only improve individual wellbeing but it would also challenge the material foundations of gender inequality.

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