

Marriage, Cohabitation and Participation in Domestic Labor: Men and Women in Contemporary Italy

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Abstract

This work aims to study whether cohabiting couples tend to introduce new patterns in the allocation of domestic labor compared to married couples or if emergent family arrangements tend to follow traditional models. After a discussion of the theoretical issues involved, the results of an analysis on the time spent by partners on domestic labor will be presented. This analysis focuses on differences in the type of relationship individuals are in; that is, whether they are married or cohabiting. A comparison between men and women will be carried out. The data used in the analyses come from the national representative survey “Multi-Purpose Family Survey – Aspects of Daily Life”, carried out in 2012 by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). The results suggest that even after taking into account other factors which tend to affect time spent in domestic labor, cohabitation appears to be a different model of partnership for women as opposed to marriage. This result is not valid for men. Men and women show different patterns of involvement into domestic labor and family life.

Keywords: Cohabitation, marriage, domestic labor, gender differences, Italy²

A comparison between cohabitation and marriage

During the last decades the number of cohabiting couples has greatly increased in Europe. In some of the northern countries, such as Sweden, Finland, Denmark and Netherlands, unmarried cohabitation is a common way, particularly for young people, to live together (Eurostat, 2010). In other countries, such as Greece, Italy, Poland cohabitation is still a limited phenomenon. Even if in the same period the number of marriages has declined, cohabitation and marriage are not to be interpreted as mutually

² A preliminary version of this paper was first presented at the Hassacc Conference 2015 (<http://hassacc.com/archive/?vid=1&aid=2&kid=150301-150>).

exclusive experiences, but may be present at different stages in an individual's life course (Arosio 2011).

A topic that is attracting the attention of many scholars of family behavior is the existence of similarities or differences between married and cohabiting couples.

There are various aspects of the marriage or cohabitation relationship which can be compared. Amongst the principal aspects are: the type of relationship the partners have, the expectations of each partner, the roles that each partner assumes within the couple and in the social environment, the level of commitment to the relationship, the level of satisfaction, the risk of instability, fertility rates, the degree to which finances are shared and the division of work both inside and outside the domestic sphere (for summary see amongst others Hamplovà, 2002).

The differences between cohabitation and marriage may be more or less accentuated depending on geographical or temporal context. Much depends on the status of cohabitation in the country: for example, in Scandinavia, where cohabitation is virtually indistinguishable from marriage, the two types of union are more similar than in southern Europe where cohabitation is less frequent and the differences are more accentuated (Dominguez, 2012).

One area of comparison between cohabitation and marriage is the type of relationship which the partners have. In the relationship between cohabiting partners there is a greater degree of freedom but there is also a degree of ambiguity: it is not clear what the partners expect from each other or what their respective roles are (Nock, 1995). Moreover, in comparison with married couples, the partners in cohabiting couples tend to show lower levels of commitment to the relationship, be less satisfied and have a less profound relationship with the family of the other partner (Nock, 1995).

Another question concerns the stability and durability of the relationship: cohabiting couples are more likely to be unstable (Axinn and Thornton, 1992; DeMaris and MacDonald, 1993; Thomson and Collela, 1992; DeMaris and Rao, 1992). Fertility rates also differ: cohabiting couples are more likely to remain childless or tend to have fewer children (Bachrach, 1987; Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel, 1990; Zhang and Song, 2007).

The degree to which a couple share their income and expenditure is also to be considered. Cohabiting couples are less likely to share finances, it being less probable that they would, for example, have a shared bank account or have property in both names (Blumstein and Schwartz, 1983; Rindfuss and Vandenheuvel, 1990, Heimdal and Houseknecht, 2003; Winkler, 1997). A lower degree of financial commitment could be due to the fact that investment is considered too risky between cohabiting partners (Brines and Joyner, 1999).

Differences can be investigated in the division of domestic and extradomestic labor between partners (Brines and Joyner 1999; South and Spitze, 1994; and in Italy Menniti and Demurtas, 2012; Meggiolaro, 2014). As far as work outside the domestic sphere is concerned, it would appear that women who cohabit are more likely to be in paid employment than married women are. In this respect the cohabiting couple would present a less traditional model than that based on marriage (see eg. Rindfuss and VandenHeuvel, 1990; South and Spitze, 1994). As far as gender division of domestic labor is concerned, it is not clear whether or not the cohabiting couple follow the traditional pattern or adopt different arrangements. Some studies suggest that cohabiting couples divide domestic chores more equally than married couples do (Batalova and Cohen, 2002; Baxter, 2005; Shelton and John, 1996; South and Spitze, 1994); further research is needed to understand the phenomenon.

This study fits into the international debate on the new family forms and the comparison between marriage and cohabitation, with a special focus on the gender division of labor. The aim of the analyses is to examine whether cohabiting couples tend to introduce new patterns in the allocation of domestic labor compared to married couples. One of the hypotheses is that this may be worth differently for men and for women. The analysis will be carried out on contemporary Italian society because in comparison with other European countries Italy maintains a traditional family structure as regards marriage, cohabitation and the division of domestic labor. It would therefore be expected that the differences between marriage and cohabitation will be even more clearly observed in Italy.

The article begins with a brief review of secondary data showing the persistence of gender differences in the distribution of domestic labor in contemporary European societies. In sections two and three, the main choices regarding the empirical analysis are explained (the research hypotheses, the specificity of the Italian context, the data used, the regression model). In the fifth section, the results of the analysis are explained. In the concluding section, the most important points of the work are recalled and some implications for future research are suggested.

Gender differences in time spent on domestic labor

Research data underline the fact that in contemporary Western countries the number of hours spent on unpaid work within the household³ is greater for women than it is for men. Figures available for the way in which men and women spend their time in European countries show that there is a

³ This refers to ‘reproductive work’ or the unpaid work entailed in maintaining the family members and the house in which they live (Coltrane, 2000).

high degree of asymmetry between genders (amongst others, see Eurostat, 2006). The extent of this gender imbalance varies comparatively in the various countries depending on a number of factors, such as: the extent of the welfare state and the social services available in the country, the percentage of women in paid employment, the degree of economic development in the country and the cultural norms regarding gender and family roles (Dominguez, 2012).

Recent changes, amongst which the increase in the number of women in paid work and the emancipation of women in society and in the family, have led to a partial redefinition of the domestic workload of men and women. In the last few years women have become progressively less involved in domestic labor as they spend less time on household tasks whereas men show increasing involvement as they are spending more time doing them. It has been shown however that the increase in male participation in domestic labor is limited and is on the whole less than the decrease in women's involvement (Eurostat, 2006). Despite these instances of change, the gender division of domestic labor remains clearly disparate: women continue to spend a greater number of hours on domestic tasks than men do (Eurostat, 2006).

Researchers have tried to explain the inequality of the distribution of domestic labor between gender in various ways. It is a complex question which brings a number of aspects and various fields of study into consideration. We summarize the main points.

One possible interpretation is to attribute differences to the social processes that define gender roles. The *socialization/gender roles perspective* refers to the process of socialization which men and women go through from birth and which gradually builds a gender identity pattern which includes roles and role expectations. This perspective would depict women as carrying out more domestic work than men (even when the women have paid employment outside the household) because they are socialized to accept the idea that domestic labor is women's work whereas men are responsible for working outside the home (Goldsheider and Waite, 1991). In particular, within marriage, housework is seen to be women's work as part of implicit deal on which a marriage is based (Berk, 1985; Ferree, 1991).

Another interpretation, the *time availability perspective*, takes into account the amount of free time which the partners have and would argue that men and women dedicate time to domestic labor on the basis of how much time is left after their respective paid employment commitments (Coverman, 1985; Hiller, 1984). In this case women are seen to take on a greater proportion of the domestic workload as they spend less time in paid employment. It should however be noted that the degree to which women are

present in the labor market would appear to depend on their domestic workload and not *vice versa* (see Spitze, 1986).

According to the *resource-power perspective*, men and women negotiate the division of housework on the basis of the resources available to each, particularly in terms of their respective professional status (Blood and Wolfe, 1960; Brines, 1994): in this case women are deemed to carry out more domestic labor on average than men because they have a lesser standing in the employment market and spend less time in paid employment. Here it should be questioned why women have fewer professional resources than men and whether their professional credentials are given the same weight as men's (see Blumberg and Coleman, 1989).

Whichever of these perspectives is the most appropriate, it would seem that gender is undoubtedly a factor which accompanies and indeed may precede the various influential processes.

Early studies of the disparity in the division of domestic labor between partners were carried out on heterosexual married couples as these represented the standard model for people living together (Dominguez, 2012). Present studies of this phenomenon are now ever more frequently taking into account other types of couple relationships, such as couples who have divorced and remarried (see Sullivan, 1997) and same sex couples (see Kurdek, 2007).

An interesting perspective of study is to compare the way domestic labor is assigned to individuals in marriage and in new types of couple relationships. The question is whether these new and increasingly widespread types of relationship are actually characterised by a different internal balance or whether they reiterate the traditional role models.

Marriage, cohabitation and the participation in domestic labor

This article examines whether the type of couple in which partners live in may affect individual levels of participation in domestic work.

Our hypothesis is that married and cohabiting individuals show a different pattern of involvement into domestic workload. In particular, we want to test if cohabiting partners present a less traditional framework as opposed to those in marriage. We also hypothesize that this may be worth differently for men and for women, accordingly a separate analysis for men and women has been carried out. The factors that can push individuals toward cohabitation without marriage and to have a less traditional distribution of domestic work have been controlled for. It is important to take these factors into consideration because they can affect the division of domestic labor between partners independently of what type of union the couple share.

The analysis was carried out on contemporary Italian society because it offers several interesting characteristics for the study of the differences between marriage and cohabitation. It has already been shown (paragraph 1) how the differences between marriage and cohabitation are more or less accentuated in different geographical locations or in different periods. In particular, the two types of union are more similar in countries where cohabitation is common practice, whereas the differences are more marked in countries where cohabitation is a marginal practice (Dominguez, 2012). Since the 1970s Italian families have gone through a process of extensive transformation. Main changes include a decrease in the number of marriages, an increase in the age at marriage and in the age at which the first child is born, a reduction in fertility, and an increase in the instability of marriages with more ending in separation or divorce (for an overview of family and marriage in Italy see among the others Arosio, 2008; Saraceno and Naldini, 2013; Ruspini, 2011). Despite showing considerable change in certain aspects, Italy maintains a traditional family structure as regards marriage, cohabitation and the division of domestic labor. In comparison with other European countries, cohabitation in Italy is still a limited phenomenon and received legal recognition only in 2016 (law n. 76/2016). In addition, comparative studies show that Italian women spend more time on average doing domestic work than other European women, whereas Italian men spend less time doing that than their counterparts in other European countries (Eurostat, 2006). It would therefore be expected that the differences between marriage and cohabitation will be even more clearly observed in Italy.

Data used for the analyses come from the national representative survey “Multi-Purpose Family Survey – Aspects of Daily Life”, carried out in 2012 by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT). This survey covers various aspects of daily life and social behavior: family, living conditions, schooling, work, free time, health conditions, social services. It contains detailed information on the weekly amount of time dedicated to domestic and extradomestic work by the members of the households (a sample of around 20,000 households involving around 50,000 people)⁴.

These data have the advantage of being very recent. In addition the use of this dataset allows methodological triangulation (*data triangulation*, see Denzin, 1978) with other recent studies on contemporary Italy using other sources from official statistics (e.g. Meggiolaro, 2014; Menniti and Demurtas, 2012). The data were made available by ADPSS Sociodata (Data Archive for Social Sciences, Department of Sociology and Social Research, University of Milano Bicocca).

⁴For details see <http://www.istat.it/it/archivio/96427>

The analytical model

The model developed here involves estimating parameters of a linear regression which can be used to evaluate how personal and family factors affect the amount of domestic labor carried out by women and men in different family arrangements. The aim is to evaluate the effect that the type of relationship (marriage or cohabitation) has on this, after taking into account other factors which can influence the propensity to enter into cohabitation and the amount of time which is spent on unpaid work.

The dependent variable of the model is the average time spent each week on domestic labor (expressed in hours). This variable includes housework, shopping and caring for family members. The variable provides an aggregate information about different types of household tasks. This may be seen as a limit, also because we know that men and women tend to share domestic work differently (for example, men are more likely to perform expressive tasks such as caring for children, while women specialize in other tasks such as housework (eg Todesco, 2014). Nevertheless, the aggregate data is very useful for our purposes because it provides an overall assessment of the domestic workload of men and women.

Taking the type of family arrangement as independent variable, the differences can be seen between individuals who are married and those who cohabit.

The regression model was calculated separately for women (N=3809) and for men (N=2937) in the sample who at the time of the interview were either married or cohabiting in a nucleus without outsiders and were aged between 18 and 45. An hypothesis is that male and female patterns may be very different. The decision to focus on a restricted age group is based on the need to analyse what is usually the first period of a couple's life together and in particular to exclude cohabitation following an earlier marriage⁵. The order in which cohabitation and marriage occur might influence the kind of balance which will be established between the partners (Meggiolaro, 2014). Moreover, as has already been mentioned, in Italy pre-marital cohabitation is a relatively recent phenomenon and we want to focus on it.

⁵ The average age at separation in Italy is around 45 for husbands and 42 for wives; for divorce it rises to 47 and 44 (Istat, 2012).

Tab. 1 Percentage distribution of the variables taken into consideration in the model

	Men (N=2937)	Women (N=3809)
Married	86,1	87,6
Cohabiting	13,9	12,4
Average age (in years)	38,4	37,3
Average level of education (in years)	11,6	12,2
Average hours paid employment per week	38,7	19,2
Northern and central Italy	61,4	60,4
Southern Italy and islands	38,6	39,6
Town population up to 10000	37,5	37,4
Town population over 10000/city suburb	62,5	62,6
Partner employed in the LM	56,3	87,4
Partner not employed in the LM	43,7	12,6
At least 1 child 0-5	47,9	41,3
1 or more children over 5	32,8	41,4
No children	19,1	17,3
Hours of housework per week	6,7	30,9

Among the regression factors in the model there are variables at individual and couple level which can be interrelated as far as participation in domestic labor and cohabitation are concerned. The variables inserted are age (in years), level of education (in years spent in full time education), presence in the paid labor market (in hours of paid employment per week⁶), presence of the partner in the paid labor market. Table 1 shows the percentage distribution of the variables in the model.

The geographical variable is expressed in zone of residence (northern and central Italy, southern Italy and the islands) and size of town of residence (small town – up to 10,000 residents, large towns –over 10,000 residents and city suburbs). There is also a variable which indicates the presence of children (couple with at least one child aged 0-5, couple with one or more children aged over 5, childless couple).

⁶ The answer “zero hours” is allowed. In this way the variable gives an overall indication of the occupational status, including the conditions “not employed/part time employed/full time employed”.

Results

The results of the regression models offer insights on the participation in domestic labor and suggest differences between women and men.

As far as women are concerned (table 2), cohabitation would appear to have a statistically significant negative effect compared to marriage with respect to the amount of hours spent on domestic labor. Cohabiting interviewees declared an average of two hours per week fewer dedicated to housework than married interviewees, net to other factors included in the model.

Table 2 Linear regression model of participation in domestic labor on selected independent variables. Estimated parameters. Italy 2012

	Women (N=3809)		Men (N=2937)	
	B	Std. Error (Sig.)	B	Std. Error (Sig.)
Constant	32.829	2.567 (.000)	3.436	1.718 (.046)
Cohabiting	-2.219	.897 (.013)	.633	.519 (.223)
Age (in years)	.173	.060 (.004)	.021	.039 (.593)
Education (in years)	-.458	.074 (.000)	.107	.047 (.023)
Hours of paid employment per week	-.396	.017 (.000)	-.084	.012 (.000)
Northern and central Italy	-3.027	.623 (.000)	0.872	.383 (.023)
Town population over 10000/ city suburb	-1.614	.582 (.006)	.446	.354 (.207)
Partner employed in the LM	1.827	0.890 (.040)	2.340	.377 (.000)
At least 1 child 0-5	11.778	.823 (.000)	3.325	.472 (.000)
1 or more children over 5	6.930	.916 (.000)	.626	0.54 (.250)

We can summarise the main indications which emerge from the model. All other conditions being equal, participation in domestic work increases with age; for every year of age around ten more minutes per week are spent doing these tasks. Degree of education shows an opposite tendency: for every extra year spent in full time higher education, women spend half an hour less per week on domestic work. All other things being equal, every hour spent in paid employment outside the home means half an hour less per week in household work. Women in the northern and central parts of Italy spend around three hours fewer on domestic labor per week than women in southern Italy and the islands. Living in a large town or city means around half an hour less per week of domestic labor for women. Women living with a partner employed in the labor market spend almost two extra hours in domestic labor. Having children makes a considerable difference: in comparison with women who have no children and all other factors being equal, women who have at least one child under 5 have an extra 12 hours of

domestic work per week. Those with children over 5 have an extra 7 hours per week.

As far as men are concerned (table 2), cohabitation as opposed to marriage has a not statistically significant effect on the amount of involvement in domestic labor. The fact of cohabiting would then seem to have a more relevant effect on the lives of women than of men.

Some indications also emerge from the analysis of the other variables in the model. They are useful to enlight differences between men and women. All other circumstances being equal, for men an increase in level of education increases the level of participation in domestic labor: for every extra year spent in higher education men work almost ten minutes more in the house each week. All other things being equal, each hour that a man works in paid employment outside the home means five minutes less domestic labor per week. Men living in northern and central Italy spend almost an hour more per week on housework than their counterparts in southern Italy and the islands. Living in a large or small town or city makes no difference to the amount of domestic labor carried out by men. Men living with a partner employed in the labor market spend more than two extra hours in domestic labor than men with a partner not employed. Compared with childless men and all other things being equal, men with at least one child under 5 spend 3 hours more per week on domestic work. Men with children over 5 years old do not spend more time on domestic labor than childless men.

Conclusion

The main issue that this study aimed to address was whether cohabiting couples tend to introduce a new scheme for the allocation of domestic labor or if they tend to follow traditional models.

From the analyses carried out, it appears that marriage and cohabitation may be different arrangement, but differences are mediated by gender. Cohabiting offers a different model of organization with respect to marriage as far as women experience is concerned. All other conditions considered in the model being equal, women who cohabit spend less time on housework than married women do. Cohabiting men do not appear to be more willing to take on a larger proportion of domestic labor if compared to married men. This is an important result because it suggests that social change is closely related to the gender dimension.

Gender differences also emerged in the way the life courses of men and women are shaped by events in the different spheres of experience. It is quite clear what happens in the case of child care. The presence of children, particularly of pre-school age, has a much greater impact on women whose time schedule is drastically restructured with the birth of children, whereas

fathers modify the amount of time spent on housework with only slight changes to their life time schedule.

Other factors contribute to modelling the gender gap. Educational qualifications and position in the labor market are factors which lessen the burden of housework for women, whereas for men a higher level of education means greater participation in household chores. Cultural influences are quite evidently linked to geographic context. The family model in the northern and central areas shows that women are less involved in domestic work than in other areas and that men participate more in domestic chores. In southern Italy and the islands the model is closer to the traditional division of roles. In larger towns and in the cities, women are less burdened by housework and men take on a greater share of the chores with respect to smaller towns where gender role division is more traditional.

Data show that domestic work and gender dimension are complex elements of social, family and individual systems. The Italian case suggests that recent changes in family life hardly seem to touch the traditional models of organization at least in their early stages, and act in different ways in the lives of men and women. Further research is needed. Comparative studies would be important by taking into account different family and social arrangements in various countries and over time. It would be very important to collect a rich amount of qualitative and quantitative data for a better understanding of the phenomenon. Moreover the analyses should be systematically extended to new types of couples.

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