

Chapter 5

Domestic Work and Parenting



Abstract This chapter deals with the last type of work distinguished in the beginning of the book—domestic work. Domestic work is often perceived as the most undesirable type of work. I describe here different attitudes of men and women to domestic work. My analysis shows great gender inequalities. Men are still perceived as helpers of women, whereas women are overwhelmed with the obligation to manage everyday life of their families. I distinguish different strategies used by men to avoid domestic duties, as well as women's attitudes to them. The chapter deals also with the concept of fairness. I show how parents define fairness and I argue that fairness does not have to mean equality in the division of domestic work. The chapter finishes with the strategies of reducing the number of hours devoted to domestic duties. It shows how that economic inequalities cannot be ignored when discussing this issue, as well as various situations of single and coupled parents.

Keywords Domestic work · Domestic help · Gender inequalities · Gender roles · Fairness · Poland

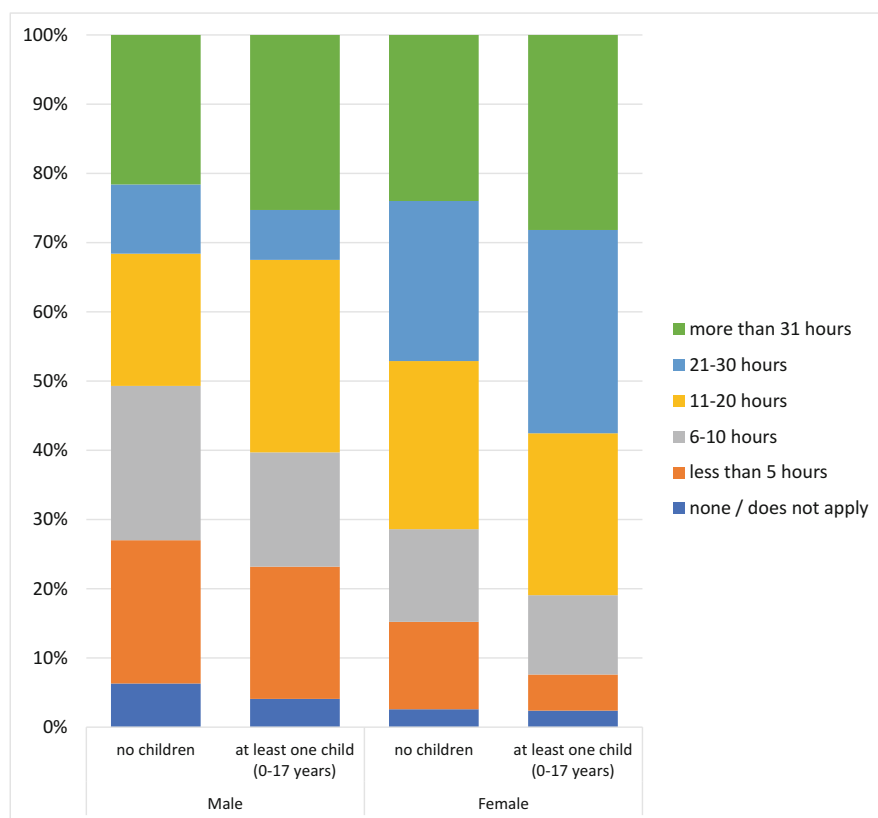
5.1 Prevailing Inequalities in the Household

In this chapter I concentrate on those domestic duties that to some extent are separate from care work and paid work. It is sometimes difficult to find a clear boundary between these types of work, especially between domestic work and care work, yet I claim here that it is important to categorise them differently in order to recognise the dynamics of gender inequality (Sullivan 2013). The interviewed parents also made a distinction between these different types of work. Domestic work is understood here as all activities done in connection to the household, such as cleaning, washing dishes, laundry, ironing, repairs and disposing of rubbish as well as shopping and preparing meals. The interviews indicated that this work is not valued as highly as care work or paid work. On the one hand, domestic work often has to be done in order to fulfil obligations resulting from other types of work. But on the other hand, it is easier to delegate to other people, delay or perform negligently. As has been argued, it is the most *undesirable* type of work (Bird and Ross 1993; Taniguchi and

Kaufman 2020). Similarly, as with care work, domestic work is traditionally assigned to women as a part of their everyday obligations resulting from gender roles (Kosakowska-Berezecka et al. 2018). Changing gender roles, in particular women's participation in the labour market, has challenged these traditional norms, and consequently, domestic work has now become an area of conflict and negotiation between couples (Hochschild and Machung 2003; Żadkowska 2016). Yet this does not mean that gender inequalities have dissolved. In fact, social research indicates that they still prevail, especially among couples with children (Coltrane 2000; Fuwa 2004; Kuhhirt 2012; Schober 2013; Solera and Mencarini 2018; Statistics Poland 2016). Becoming a parent results in a significant increase in domestic and care duties, as well as in a reinforcement of traditional gendered norms regarding everyday practices. As Carmen Sirianni and Cynthia Negrey note: 'Increases in total household-labor time, which result primarily from the presence of children (the more and the younger), lead to larger increases in the wives' than the husbands' contributions to such labor' (2000, p. 62). The reinforcement of traditional gender roles is also observable in Polish society (Reimann 2016, 2019; Titkow et al. 2004; Żadkowska 2016). This can be explained with prevailing models of motherhood and fatherhood that are based on strong gender norms, as well as the welfare state regime that reproduces gender inequalities. In Polish society, on the one hand, there is a high gender equity in individual-oriented institutions such as employment and education. A woman's right to participate in the education system and labour market is not questioned. On the other hand, family-oriented institutions are characterised by low gender equity. Such a situation leads to a bifurcation in how women perceive their obligations resulting from different spheres of their lives (McDonald 2000; Neyer et al. 2013).

Gender inequalities in Polish households are confirmed by the survey data. According to the ISSP in 2012 women with at least one child spend on average 23.4 h per week on household work (not including childcare and leisure time activities), whereas the equivalent figure for men is only 17.79 h. In comparison, childless women spent 20.14 h and childless men 15.58. These statistics show that for both men and women having children leads to an increase in time devoted to household work. Graph 5.1 shows these differences more clearly. Twenty-seven percent of childless men and 23% of fathers spent less than 5 h per week on household work, at the same time only 15% of childless women and 8% of mothers spend less than 5 h on such work. This shows that men more often withdraw from domestic duties. Yet it does not mean that these duties are not carried out—it rather means that they are transferred to women.

CBOS (Public Opinion Research Centre in Poland) conducts regular studies on the division of domestic work in Polish households. Even though men's participation in household duties has been increasing since 2004, by 2018 women were still mainly responsible for most of these duties (see Table 5.1). In over 80% of households, women usually do the laundry and ironing. Whereas in over 60% of households, women usually prepare meals and do the household cleaning. Men engage more often than women only in ordering external services and making minor repairs, which are not as engaging and time-consuming as other everyday domestic



Graph 5.1 On average, how many hours a week do you personally spend on household work, not including childcare and leisure time activities? Source ISSP 2012. Prepared by the author

duties. Thus even though in 2018 men were more involved in domestic work, gender inequality still persists.

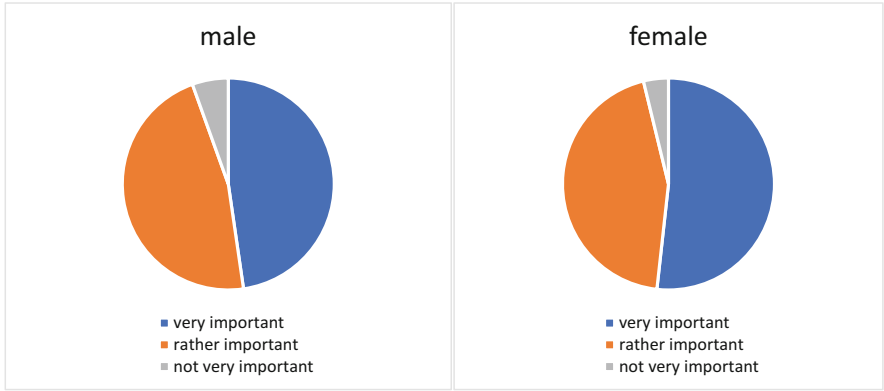
Interestingly, the level of everyday practices is not congruent with what people have to say about sharing domestic duties. In the European Value Survey (EVS) in 2017 Poles were asked whether they thought that sharing household chores is important for a successful marriage or partnership. Only 5.5% of men and 3.8% of women said it is not very important. In general, women (51.7%) more often than men (47.7%) agreed that it is very important, but keeping in mind the low engagement of Polish men in domestic duties, the level of their agreement is still very high (see Graph 5.2).

Individuals' declarations and opinions are not always realised in practice. Maria Reimann (2019) in her research on Polish couples with an egalitarian approach to domestic and care duties shows that upon becoming parents they often lean to a more traditional model of the division of everyday obligations. Even though these couples declared that fairness and equality were important values for them, after having

Table 5.1 Who in your household usually performs the following household duties?

	Men		Women		Jointly or N/A	
	2004	2018	2004	2018	2004	2018
	Percentage					
Preparing meals	6	5	76	65	18	30
Washing dishes/loading and removing dishes from the dishwasher ^a	8	13	71	56	21	31
General cleaning	6	4	69	61	25	35
Thorough cleaning (window cleaning, rug beating)	7	8	62	57	31	35
Laundry	3	2	87	82	10	15
Ironing	4	6	87	81	9	13
Everyday shopping	12	12	59	37	29	51
Ordering external services	66	60	19	17	25	23
Making minor repairs		81		7		12
Taking out rubbish	34	29	22	21	44	50

Source: CBOS 2018
^aAdded in 2018



Graph 5.2 Some people think that sharing household chores is important for a successful marriage or partnership. What do you think? Source EVS 2017. Prepared by the author

children women started to do more in the household. In such a way gendered beliefs were still present in their lives, but in a less explicit way. Similar conclusions are drawn by Magdalena Żadkowska (2016), who conducted research on the division of domestic work for Polish couples. She observes that there is a substantial change in a couple’s life after childbirth—usually women undertake most domestic duties. They become managers of everyday household obligations, whereas a man’s job is to help her with these duties.

5.2 “I Try to Do as Much as I Can”. Men and Domestic Chores

Analysis of in-depth interviews with Polish parents also indicates that there are significant differences in the engagement of men and women in domestic work. Even though the amount of time men spend on unpaid domestic work has increased in the twentieth century, they still spend fewer hours on domestic chores than women (Hook 2006). The interviewed couples can be divided into two types. The first type realises the model of a traditional family, in which women are mostly responsible for all the obligations in the household, whereas the role of men is not to interrupt or disturb women in their work.

I: I guess I'd want him to . . . how to say it . . . not to do certain chores, but . . . I mean if we have a second child, then it will be necessary, but now I'm fine. Although, I'd prefer him not to make a mess himself, oh! [laugh].

R: You mean, he should not disturb you?

I: Yes, yes. That's what I mean. [C18W25 Luiza]

In the second type, couples try to share domestic duties equally, they often discuss the division of obligations so as to ensure that the woman is not overwhelmed. One portion of such couples still struggle with an unequal or unfair share of the workload that is mostly experienced by women (more on the sense of fairness in Sect. 5.4). In both types, men's engagement in domestic work is often called ‘help’. Perceiving men's domestic work in terms of *help* or *support* is characteristic for both mothers and fathers regardless of their working situation.

The division [of domestic work] is fluid, I guess. [My wife] cooks, because I can't cook. So this situation evolved by itself. I try to help her in cleaning up, so she doesn't have to do it, yet it doesn't always work. [C4M5 Aleksander]

We talked about it [the division of domestic work], but as I said, my husband is away all week, he comes back on Friday, so there's just Saturday and Sunday when he's tired because he travels a lot. So I got used to the fact that all these domestic duties are mine, although we do have fights about them because I'd like him to help me more. [C16W23 Ewelina]

The prevalence of using the word ‘help’, even by couples who have an equalitarian approach, suggests that men's role in the household is still perceived as secondary, and that men (but also women) do not fully internalise *new* norms resulting from the changing gender order. Some interviewed women, who are more aware of the prevailing gender inequalities and more reflexive about the organisation of everyday life, recognise the problem of using the word ‘help’ in the context of their partner's or husband's engagement in domestic work.

I: So I like to cook, but you probably know how I feel, I like to cook on weekends, to prepare dinner for us in the evening, but not necessarily weekday cooking like sandwiches or a pork cutlet with potatoes. But my husband also cooks during weekdays. Not very complicated dishes, but he can cook something. Doing laundry, cooking, general cleaning we share all of that, but from the very beginning it always annoyed me, when he was saying that he would help me with something. This simply means that this is my thing but he can help out a bit.

R: Yes, I can see how people would say that.

I: Yes, men are *helpful* [original emphasis], so now I try to make him aware that these are our common responsibilities. [P1K1 Jola]

Jola's comment draws attention to the meaning hidden behind the word 'help'. Using such terms as 'help' or 'support' in the context of men's housework suggests that this work is not regarded as their main obligation even though they live in the same household and benefit from this work to the same extent as women (Jarska 2020). This also means that men have more power to choose what they do in the household. Interestingly, the interviewed men are perfectly aware that they do less than their partners or wives. I distinguish three main excuses they use to explain their lower engagement in domestic work. First, the interviews indicate that men often refer to traditional gender roles and a woman's predisposition to fulfil everyday domestic tasks.

R: You're saying that your wife is sometimes angry that she does more than you. Are you trying to change it then?

I: No, I think that I do more than an average man. But I know I do less than her, that's clear, but I think it's normal, we cannot expect this sudden change in a society that it [the division of domestic work] should be fifty-fifty now if it never was like that before. It's difficult to organise because I also think that women have a greater ability to combine different tasks. They have everything organised, they know how to handle stuff, whereas men don't have such a talent [laugh]. It's enough if they [men] sometimes do the dishes, vacuum or take the rubbish out or, I don't know, take care of children. [C5M6 Filip]

Filip's wife is perfectly aware of her husband's way of thinking and even though she does not agree with it, she accepts it.

My husband assumes that a woman, me as a woman, as a more practical person can get more done [housework] and faster than him too. So he thinks that if I want something done quickly, then I should do it myself. [C5W7 Anna]

These division-based traditional gender roles are often reinforced by the division of paid work—when only the man is the sole breadwinner, then the woman stays at home (for example because of parental leave) and *naturally* undertake almost all domestic duties, even when she does not like it.

I mean because my wife stays at home, she simply does more things. So laundry, cooking and other stuff is done by my wife. [C16M18 Bartosz]

It's an ongoing battle. There's blood sometimes [laugh]. As I said, it's dynamic. At the beginning certain things meant my wife did all the housework, but she rebelled, and we argued a lot. On the one hand, she didn't work for pay, she was home a lot and I was working a lot, so practically all [household] obligations were on her shoulders. But she didn't like it. On the other hand, there was no other option. So we were both frustrated, me because I was tired after a full day at work, then had to hear complaints that I didn't help at home and that she worked hard but I didn't appreciate it. So now we're trying to deal with this. [C17M19 Mikołaj]

The second reason given for men's lower engagement in domestic work is connected to what Mikołaj mentioned in the above quote—men often indicate that they are too tired to participate in it more. This tiredness is usually a consequence of spending more hours on paid work than their partners or wives.

I: Sometimes I think I should do more about the house, but I don't have time.

R: Do you feel guilty?

I: Yes, yes. So I would like to do more, but if you come back from work tired, then you just want to rest. [C12M13 Darek]

In such a way the traditional division of paid work can reinforce the traditional division of domestic work. It is worth mentioning that even though men use the excuse of being tired the Time Use Survey conducted by Statistics Poland indicates that women in general spend more hours on ‘duty time’ than men (this includes paid work, voluntary work, domestic work, family work and education), whereas men have more rest time. This applies at each stage of life (Statistics Poland 2016). Thus the argument of long working hours used by the interviewed men usually refers only to hours spent on paid work but does not recognise work done in the household.

The third excuse made by men concerns the organisation of care work. The interviews indicate that many men avoid household duties by taking care of children.

I: One night I was wondering if we equally or unequally share [domestic and care duties] and how much time we spend with the kids. And I came to the conclusion that we share equally, but even though we share equally my wife does two thirds of the domestic work. This is because when I see a crisis, I leave.

R: What kind of crisis?

I: When there is a mess at home, such a big mess, then I run away. I just can't begin to . . .

R: But do you run away with the kids?

I: Yes, with the kids, I say we're going for a walk. No, I don't run away alone - no. [C2M3 Kamil]

He definitely is a super-dad, he spends lots of time with our son, but at some point it started to bother me, because I didn't have time to play with [my son], because I had too many things to do alone. And it ended up that I finished all the domestic duties but my son was so tired he went straight to sleep. [C4W5 Ela]

He spends lots of time with the kids. He more often reads to them, plays with them. And then I have time to deal with the domestic duties. [C5W7 Anna]

These findings are congruent with other research on fatherhood that indicates that men are responsible for the aspects of being a parent which are more fun—they are more often responsible for playing with children than for mundane everyday activities such as cooking or cleaning (Evertsson 2014; Johansson and Klinth 2008; Szlendak 2011). It can be assumed that this is because the reconstruction of masculinity models concentrates more on care practices than other traditional female obligations (Elliott 2016; Scambor et al. 2014). Men are relatively new actors in the area of domestic and care work, and so have greater power to choose what kind of activities they want to be involved in as fathers and members of the household. The activities they reject then have to be undertaken by women (Suwada 2017). Care work is often seen as more satisfying and valuable than domestic work (Bianchi et al. 2012; Sullivan 2013), so it is not surprising that men choose them over household duties. At the same time, men often recognise that their engagement in domestic work is lower than that of their partner or wife. For many of them it is a comfortable situation, even though they sometimes feel guilty about it.

5.3 “I Just Don’t Want to Force Him”. Women as Managers of Everyday Life

Men’s approach to domestic work is strictly connected to the role of women in the domestic sphere. Unpaid work in the household is treated as a *natural* element of a woman’s role in the family (Titkow et al. 2004). Consequently, even though women participate in the labour market, they are still expected to be responsible for work in the domestic sphere. Their partner or husband should support them in this work, yet this work is still seen as a woman’s responsibility. Thus women are responsible for the smooth organisation of the household, they take the role of managers in domestic life. The narrative of Polish mothers indicates that they recognise their role as primary managers, and for many of them it is an overwhelming situation, which on the one hand often leads to arguments between partners, but on the other hand is perceived as unchangeable in each interviewee’s current situation. According to the researched mothers, the inevitability of unequal division of domestic work results from different reasons. First, for many women being the domestic manager is to some extent comfortable, because they have control over everyday life.

Sometimes I’d like to change something, but it’s only when I’m really tired. In fact, I prefer doing everything my own way. Because, for example, when I see my husband vacuuming, I prefer to take this vacuum cleaner and do it by myself [laugh]. [C19W27 Róża]

So I cook. When it comes to cleaning up, my husband tries to clean up, but he’s generally slower, so sometimes I have to admit I don’t want him to do it, even though he can do it, because I know I do it faster. I know that’s a little bit crazy [laugh]. [C4W5 Ela]

Such an approach by women to domestic work can be interpreted as *gatekeeping*, a strategy which mothers often adopt to make sure her family is not at risk or does not miss some opportunities. In such a way women sustain their power within the family. The strategy of gatekeeping is more often than not used to describe women’s approach to caregiving, yet it can also be adopted to depict a woman’s managerial role in the context of allocating domestic work (Allen and Hawkins 1999; Gaunt 2007; Latshaw and Hale 2016). What is more, this narrative is often connected with reasoning based on personal preferences. In the interviews parents usually give an example of different definitions of cleanliness. Some people do not mind having a dirty kitchen or an unvacuumed carpet. For others such things are unbearable. Some interviewed parents refer to these differences to explain an unequal division of domestic work, yet the narratives indicate that women in general have higher standards of tidiness, and consequently, they more often end up doing more household duties, such as general cleaning, vacuuming or washing dishes.

Everyone has a different standard learned at home of what tidiness means. And for me, for example, what is order for me is a mess for my wife. And for me vacuuming once a week is even too often but for her . . . she’d like to vacuum every day. So we’re always going to fight about this. [C15M16 Witold]

Sometimes we’ll have a minor quarrel about this [housework], but in general . . . it’s not like it’s carved in stone that I have to do it, I don’t feel it has to be me who does it, and nor does he. It’s more that we feel we should get it done together. It’s just that, well, sometimes my need to clean something up may be greater than his, and his need to rest at this time may be greater. [C2W3 Ola]

Yet it can be argued that personal preferences are shaped by socio-cultural structures. Women’s greater focus on order in the household can be explained by gender beliefs, according to which a woman is expected to take care of domestic duties. These gender beliefs are learned in the process of socialisation (Chodorow 1999), which teaches boys and girls different attitudes to domestic chores. In such a way greater engagement in particular domestic duties is rather connected with prevailing models of masculinity and femininity than individual preferences. As the research of Natasza Kosakowska-Berezecka et al. (2018) indicates, some household activities are perceived as feminine, whereas others as masculine. Since activities connected to general cleaning and preparing meals are perceived as more feminine by Poles, the interviewed mothers and fathers can, sometimes even unconsciously, behave according to these perceptions, and consequently have a different approach to order and disorder in the household.

Mothers often compare themselves to others, in particular their own parents and other family members, to a time when the organisation of everyday life was even more traditional, to when men did not participate in domestic work at all. Many interviewed women emphasised that when they were children, their mothers were overwhelmed with domestic and care work, even though they usually worked for pay full-time, whereas their fathers did not know how to cook or clean and limited their parental obligations to breadwinning. In such a context when a partner or husband does *anything* in the household it is looked upon favourably.

I think that in our family it isn’t so bad [laugh]. I remember when I was a child there was a patriarchy. A husband was a king in his own castle, and a wife did all the work. For example, my mum did everything, managed all the family, did the cooking . . . and she worked for pay even more than my father. That’s just the way things were in those days. [C17W23 Irena]

These findings are congruent with the research of Theodore Greenstein (2009) on household labour, in which he found that satisfaction with the fairness of dividing household labour is moderated by the level of gender equity in the national context. This means that women compare their situation to that of others, and are either more satisfied/dissatisfied with the division of household duties in their family. My study suggests that they not only make a comparison with women in a similar situation, but also to previous generations.

A recurring theme in the interviews with mothers is the need to force men to engage in more domestic duties. Women often have to constantly remind their partner or husband that they need to wash the dishes, vacuum, clean the bathroom and so on. Many such women are actually tired of this constant reminding and consequently prefer to do it themselves.

I sometimes feel bad that I nag him and say “Hey, you need to clean up” or “Do this and do that” [grimace], you know? I don’t like . . . I don’t like myself in such a role. But on the other

hand, if I don't remind him, it doesn't get done. And this is a perennial problem [. . .]. Why can't he clean up of his own free will? Why? [C2W3 Ola]

It's a nightmare to force him to do anything. I need to remind him. I talked to my girlfriends and they say it's the same for them too. That you need to remind him, sometimes even a few times, that he needs to do something. [C5W7 Anna]

He's more involved [in domestic work] when I yell at him. But it's only for five minutes. It's getting better - he is trying. I know he works and he's tired. But on the other hand I'm tired too with this monotony of constantly being with the children and with the lack of time for myself. It's very difficult. [C16W23 Ewelina]

These narratives indicate that Polish mothers, overwhelmed with duties resulting from paid work, care work and domestic work, are also responsible for making their male partners more involved in household work. Somehow they become responsible for their husband sharing domestic duties with them—in a way they are responsible for introducing a partnership into their relationship.

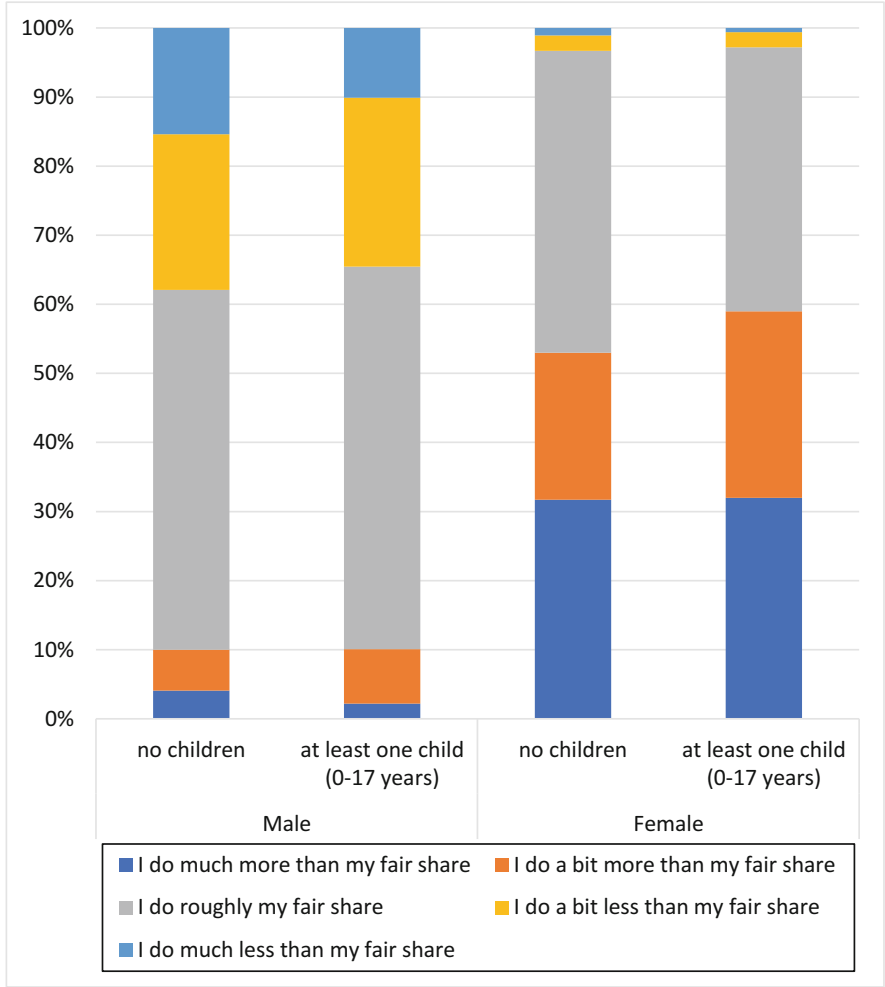
5.4 “I Think It's Fair”. The Sense of Fairness and Gender Roles

According to the 2012 ISSP data 59% of women with children aged 0–17 years think that they do more than their fair share. Less than 3% think that they do less than their fair share. At the same time 36.6% of men with children aged 0–17 admit that they do less than their fair share, while 55.4% declare that they do roughly their fair share (see Graph 5.3).

This data shows that there is a discrepancy in how people perceive the division of domestic duties in the household, whether they consider it fair or unfair. A sense of fairness is very subjective and each partner in a couple may assess the division differently. Thus as interviews with Polish parents indicate, discussions about this issue are often challenging and lead to misunderstandings. This issue is especially difficult for women, who do not always have the ability or strength to explain their point of view. They sometimes lack the external, objective measures which help them to prove their stance.

I mean talking about this . . . I mean sometimes I dream of having a neutral observer, someone who could record my day, because I simply don't have time to do it. And at the end of each day this observer could tell [my partner] “Listen, her day looked like this: from the early morning she did this, that and the other. I'm not being funny, but it's simply too much for her, it's unfair”. I can't tell him this, I don't know how to do it. It's very difficult for me, so I need a witness . . . this remains unsaid, all this grief and anger which is cumulating every day. It's so hard for me, emotionally hard. [C3W4 Joanna]

The issue of fairness appeared very often in the interviews with Polish parents in the context of domestic work. Yet it should be noted here that the concept of fairness does not have to imply equal division of domestic work. As Jonathan Ives notes, fairness ‘is highly subjective and context dependent, and supervenes on facts such as



Graph 5.3 Which of the following best applies to the sharing of household work between you and your spouse/partner? Source ISSP 2012. Prepared by the author

expectations, relationship norms, appetite for certain kinds of work, capacity and competence. Therefore, what is fair in the context of one couple will not be fair in another, and what is considered *fair* overall may not be what is *equal*’ (Ives 2015, p. 289). Thus the issue of fairness is not about objective justice, but rather a type of social contract on the domestic level (Olcoń-Kubicka 2020). Different conceptions of fairness were visible in the interviews with Polish parents. Fairness does not have to mean that the opportunity structures for mothers and the fathers are exactly the same, but rather that they perceive their situation as fair and acceptable. It is also important that both parents agree on the organisation of work and everyday life.

Following Jonathan Ives' study (2015) on how fathers construct fairness in their fathering practices, I distinguish three different ways fairness is defined in the context of household duties. First, there are parents who perceive fairness as reciprocity. This way of thinking refers to a traditional model of family in which the mother is the primary carer and the father is the primary breadwinner. Yet because of changing models of masculinity and femininity these roles are not unchangeable, and there is a need for each person in the relationship to recognise the burden placed on their partner. In my Polish interviews it is usually stressed that a man should *help* his partner or wife with domestic duties.

I: You know it's changing, because when [my wife] was working this division was different, when she stays at home, it's different. So it's now rather rigid, but it changes sometimes. So from the very beginning . . . at the very beginning [my wife] was already pregnant [and stayed at home] and she has always been doing more of the domestic duties.

R: So do you think it's fair? Would you change anything?

I: I guess I'm more content with it than [my wife], because I do less, but I think it's fair. [C16M16 Witold]

Yet the interviews show that such a perception of fairness is not very common, and is rarely accepted by both partners. It only works for a couple when both parents hold the same view, and this often changes as children are growing up. In the following citation Irena says that even though as a couple they agreed on a traditional division at the beginning of their marriage, she still had a sense of unfairness. Consequently, at the time of the interview they were trying a new organisation of work.

And even though he helped me, I had this feeling of asymmetry, because for me the time spent on care and domestic work seemed endless, you know, but time spent on paid work is limited. He had free time, but I had a feeling I never had free time [. . .]. But I wasn't sure if I could make any demands, because whenever we started to argue, he'd say: "But this is what we agreed on – I work, you take care of the home." I just didn't feel comfortable with this situation. [C17W23 Irena]

The considerations of Irena are congruent with a second way of defining fairness—fairness as equality. Parents who perceive fairness in terms of equality try to divide time spent on domestic duties equally or try to share all tasks (see also: Reimann 2016). This usually requires some discussion by the couple (usually initiated by the woman) and careful calculation on how much time each task takes.

R: Did you discuss this division [that the woman cooks, the man cleans up]? Or did it just happen?

I: No, no. It was hard work. One day I noted how many hours each duty takes, and I showed it to [my partner]. How much time it takes to cook each day, do the shopping and so on. [My partner] also cooks, but rarely, occasionally. It's rather a matter of choice than necessity, you know? So when he feels like it, he cooks something [. . .]. So I showed him how many hours all these different tasks take, and told him that I would rather not clean the toilet, so that we need to set the division [of labour]. In short – we set the division.

R: Ok. So do you now have a sense of fair division?

I: No, I cook more, much more than he cleans up in terms of time. [C10W12 Weronika]

This approach is very difficult to maintain because it requires calculations and sticking to an arranged division of work. That is why many parents, who perceive fairness as equality, talk about it in terms of *trying* rather than an actual situation. Fairness as equality is not something that is easily achieved, but something which people aim for. What is more, parents sometimes experience trouble when demarking boundaries between different types of work. In the strategy of fairness as equality it is important not to confuse time spent on paid work or care work with time spent on domestic work, because then there is a risk of ending up in a relationship based on traditional gender roles, which is something that such parents try to avoid.

I was thinking several times about it [a fair division of domestic duties] and it’s very difficult, especially in such a relationship as ours in which I work full-time and [my wife] has a nonstandard schedule. [But] you need to do your paid work duties and then domestic duties [...] you should not compensate for the fact that you work more by avoiding domestic duties. [C7M8 Stefan]

Finally, fairness is perceived in terms of functional specialisations. It is based on the assumption that people are good in different things, and so they split their responsibilities along those lines. Such an approach is often connected with personal preferences, in particular it helps to avoid those obligations which are particularly disliked by one person in a couple. Yet it is important that this division applies only to domestic duties and there is no confusion of time devoted to paid work with that of domestic/care work.

I: With this division it’s like – who likes what. I hate taking the rubbish out, so I don’t do it at all. I don’t like washing the dishes either. I have traumatic memories from childhood, when I was forced to do the dishes. So we try to do different things. I was interested in child feeding, so I do that. It’s not always perfect, but it works somehow.

R: So do you have a sense of fairness?

I: I have a sense that we’re trying. I have a feeling that we’re both overloaded [laugh]. We’re both tired and as my friend said: “I’d like him to do more, but when I think about it, I know he doesn’t have time for it.” [C11W13 Sylwia]

R: So do you feel that your organisation of domestic work is fair?

I: Yes. I don’t expect [my husband] to do 50% because he does a lot. And I know that I do more in some areas and that’s ok because there are lots of things he does which he’s good at. [C8W10 Iga]

Analysis of the interviews shows that household work creates the most quarrels and misunderstandings between couples. Domestic duties are perceived as the most boring, continuous and often senseless, since their effects do not last long. What is more, this kind of work is the most undervalued, and individuals performing most of such tasks feel that their hard work is not recognised as important. This might have negative consequences for the relationship. Hence the narratives of parents indicate that there is a great effort to make this division fair in different ways.

5.5 “We Have a Lady Coming Once a Week”. Strategies to Reduce Domestic Duties

Keeping in mind the problem of fairness in the division of domestic work, it is not surprising that many parents develop different strategies to reduce the amount of time spent on it. One strategy, adopted by more affluent parents, is to outsource domestic work by hiring household help. This is one of the most effective ways of reducing conflicts over the division of domestic work and relieving mothers.

We don't have any conflicts about domestic chores, but that's because there is this lady who comes once a week and neatly cleans the apartment [...]. We have our aunt Marta, a lady who comes to clean up. And she cleans up the apartment and does the ironing. So fortunately, we don't have to do it. There is an informal division that I'm responsible for laundry and my husband for dishes and the dishwasher. [C6W8 Ida]

We hire Mrs. Maria, she comes once a week and cleans up, it's simply wonderful! [C3W4 Joanna]

Yet for many parents such a solution is too expansive, they cannot afford to hire anyone to help with household chores. Many parents also recognise the importance of household appliances that help to avoid some tiring and troublesome duties such as washing clothes or dishes and assist in many household obligations.

I: We don't have much trouble. We have a dishwasher, so there is no problem with this [dirty dishes].

R: So I guess you have no problems with laundry either?

I: No, no problem. And we've changed the washing machine to a washer-dryer, so now we don't have to hang clothes up to dry. You put the clothes in, they are washed, dried and you just take them out. Voila! [...] All this stuff is automatised. Thirty years ago my parents didn't have such conveniences. [C6M7 Krzysztof]

I: In the new house we plan to have a dishwasher. It's the most important item because sometimes I get the impression that I spend all day Sunday washing dishes, and I don't know how it happens, where do they all come from? [...] Besides, I want this automated vacuum cleaner and mop, but [my husband] is not convinced...

R: Automated mop?

I: Yes, one is vacuuming and the other is cleaning the floor, they communicate with each other, and they do it all when you're not at home. So you go out, they clean, and when you come back everything is done. It's so cool! [C2W3 Ola]

Other sources of help are often the children's grandmothers, who sometimes engage in domestic duties when visiting their grandchildren.

Sometimes, once or twice a month my mum comes to look after the kid, then she does the dishes, cleans the kitchen or, I don't know, tidies up in the living room. And when my mother-in-law visits, she does the ironing or cooks. But it's not that often. (C17W23 Irena)

The help of grandparents, in particular grandmothers, is especially visible with single parents, who are solely responsible for all domestic duties.

When I lived with my husband, we had a household helper, but now I don't. I mean my mum comes often, more often than before [...]. She comes willingly, without any fights then stays

for two or three days and deals with the household. She cooks something and helps with the children in the morning. It’s a great help. [S2W2 Ewa]

R: And when it comes to household chores, since you live with your parents now, how does it work?

I: I definitely have seventy percent less than before. You know I like cooking. I like it very much [...] so before [the divorce and move back to her parents] I never thought about it as something, I don’t know, scary. It was normal, you have to eat breakfast, dinner and supper, but of course there were days when I was tired, but ... now when I’m tired my mum always cooks something. There is always something to eat now. [S4W14 Agata]

The help of grandmothers is especially appreciated by single parents, who often experience a greater burden of domestic work than parents in couples. This is notably evident in the case of single fathers, who after splitting up with their partner need to undertake all domestic duties that they did not carry out before.

Definitely, I have more now. In a sense that in fact, before, we had a rather conservative model and most duties were done by my wife, like cleaning up and cooking, it [the division of labour] was like eighty percent to twenty percent. And now I deal with all these household duties on my own. Sometimes someone helps me, but it’s very rare. So I see changes and feel them, my ex-wife also as I still talk to her. It’s much more difficult to deal with everything. [S1M2 Marek]

All these everyday things like shopping, laundry and everything I have to do alone, alone. Everyone laughs that I have muscular arms and asks if I’m working out or something, and I say “shopping bags and climbing stairs” [laugh]. So I laugh, but yeah ... I have no choice. Nobody else does it for me. [S3W6 Iwona]

Possibility structures which reduce the hours spent on domestic duties vary greatly. Most of all, there is a difference between parents according to economic resources. More affluent parents can more easily afford to hire domestic help, and thereby save time for themselves and their family. For less affluent parents the situation depends on the availability of grandparents, mostly grandmothers, who can come and help. But it should be noted that grandparents are not always willing to help, quite often they live too far away to be able to provide support. Thus some parents adopt coping strategies: not performing less urgent duties or postponing them. Single parents, who have such a possibility, usually do such duties when their children spend time with the second parent.

The only time I have to relax is when my ex-husband takes the children every other weekend, [...]. And to be honest, one weekend a fortnight is enough for me to regenerate. And this is also the time to thoroughly clean the flat, I don’t know, mop the floor, wash the bathroom, do some big shopping. So it’s not only for me, but also for the flat. [S2W2 Ewa]

Other parents deal with the lack of time by doing domestic duties in the so called ‘meantime’. The strategy of meantime is especially available for parents who can do at least part of their paid work from home. This is the case for Weronika, who can cook in between different working tasks.

R: Why are you responsible for cooking?

I: Because I can do it in the meantime. And I prefer cooking to cleaning. [C10W12 Weronika]

But it is also a common strategy for parents who are responsible for looking after their children.

You often long for a day when you can get something [household work] done in the meantime. But sometimes it's impossible [...]. So when you're staying home and have nothing to do and your child falls asleep, then you can tidy up, can't you? [C2W3 Ola]

All these strategies show that even though domestic work is not given much importance, and is often perceived as a burden, it still has to be done. Domestic work, even though often invisible and unrecognised, is an important element of individuals' everyday life so cannot be omitted.

5.6 Conclusion

The interviewed parents perceive domestic work as the least important of all types of work done in connection with parenthood. It is the most boring and is perceived as never ending, since their efforts are not long-lasting (Oakley 2018). Domestic duties are also the area of greatest conflict for couples. Parents argue less often over the division of paid work and care work, this is because these types of work are recognised as important and (can) bring satisfaction. Similarly, as is the case for paid work and care work, domestic work is a highly gendered area of social life. Yet the interviews of the Polish mothers indicate that for them the gendered division of domestic work is particularly painful and least understood. Women perform more domestic duties than men in general. As Latshaw and Hale's study indicates (2016), even in families with breadwinning mothers and stay-at-home fathers, women undertake domestic and care duties when they are at home (during evenings, weekends and holidays), instead of having leisure time. According to Latshaw and Hale (2016), stay-at-home fathers enjoy substantially greater amounts of leisure time than breadwinning mothers, stay-at-home mothers, or employed fathers who work full-time or part-time. Gender beliefs impose on women an obligation to be the person who is mainly responsible for the household, regardless of their other duties. That is why in times of changing gender roles mothers are managers of the everyday functioning of the household, whereas men are perceived as helpers who provide support when needed. At the same time, such gender relations are hard to explain by biological differences alone. In Chap. 3 on care work, I argued that parents often refer to biological differences to explain the difference of engagement in care work for men and women. The main argument was based on a woman's ability to breastfeed—men as the ones who lack such an ability were excluded from many caregiving practices. Even though such reasoning is not sound for every interviewed parent, for many of them it is logical and can explain the differences between the level of engagement in care work between men and women. Domestic work cannot be explained in the same way. There are no biological differences between men and women which would justify women spending more time on household duties than men. It is rather a matter of prevailing gender beliefs which are social and cultural

constructs grounded in the structures of social inequalities. Consequently, Polish mothers who work full-time and are perceived as the main caregivers, are overwhelmed with domestic duties which they expect to be shared more equally with their husbands or partners. Interestingly, when asked even men agree that in general sharing domestic duties is important for a successful marriage or partnership.

Analysis of the interviews indicates that parents adopt different definitions of fairness. Fairness does not have to mean equal time spent on domestic duties, but is rather connected with an agreement between the couple, it corresponds with other parental obligations resulting from paid and care work. Similarly, as in the case of the organisation of care work, it is important to recognise the differences resulting from economic resources as well as from the specific family situation. It is easier for more affluent parents to outsource household duties to external help. Some parents can count on help from grandmothers. In both of these cases the gender inequalities are particularly visible. Household duties are transferred from mothers to other women—a female household helper or a grandmother. Such strategies, even though they help with fulfilling parental obligations, reinforce gender inequalities. They do not change men's approach to domestic duties, but rather can strengthen beliefs that such duties are feminine.

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