

Concept of housework of married women: personal happiness, cooperation, bargaining, and the burden of generalist

Ziming Wang*

University of Washington-Seattle, College of Arts and Sciences. Seattle, Washington, United States

Abstract: With the deepening of the ideology of gender equality in Chinese society, the traditional pattern of division of housework, constructed based on traditional gender perspectives, was challenged. The attitudes of married women towards housework also changed. However, those attitudes are not independent of the influence of the time in which women live. Different ages have different political, material, and cultural elements, shaping different attitudes towards housework for women born in different generations. The earlier the generation of women, the closer the contact with traditional gender ideologies, and the more likely they become the main undertaker of housework. On the other hand, women born in the later generation make different choices under the guidance of rationality due to the convenience of obtaining information, the development of technology, and the trend of globalization.

1. Introduction

Housework usually refers to a series of unpaid work performed to meet the needs of family members or to maintain the family and its internal relationships.[1] Traditional gender perspectives recognize the division of labor between men and women in a mode of specialization, and it regards women undertaking housework and men undertaking paid jobs as natural.[2] In China, this mode of specialization is called "man outside, women inside." Under the influence of the patriarchal culture, many women believe that it is a woman's inescapable responsibility to keep house, take care of her husband, and raise children. Domestic work, like any other remunerative and productive work, is of value. For example, research in 2023 found that the total value of unpaid domestic work in Beijing was about 10% of GDP that year.[3] But housework is unpaid, and the value of women's labor is exploited in the name of "love" and "motherhood." [4]

Since 1949, influenced by the socialist concept of gender equality, Chinese women have stepped out of the family and gradually entered the fields of politics, economy, education, and culture. In these fields, women have made outstanding achievements, gradually narrowing the gap with men and even surpassing men in some fields. According to results released by the National Bureau of Statistics of China in 2012, the proportion of female college students reached 51.2 percent in 2011. According to data from the University Financial Database of China Infobank, the number of urban women employed in China reached 54.589 million in 2012, up from 600,000 in 1949. Data from China's 2010 census show that women account for 51.1 percent of professional and technical

workers. The above statistics show that more and more women are stepping out of the family, pursuing higher education, and entering the labor market, and the social status of Chinese women has been rising over the past half-century. With the rise of women's social status, the traditional division of labor between men and women began to be challenged, but women were still the primary undertakers of housework. [5] According to the data by Main Data of the Fourth Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women, Chinese women spend about twice as much time as men doing housework. [6], [7] Married women often face the pressure of multiple conflicting identities, including mothers, wives, and professional women. Housework as a gender symbol makes many women have to become a "generalist" who needs to take care of both housework and work. Juggling career and family can put enormous pressure on women and affect their physical and mental health and marital satisfaction. Besides, The division of housework is also likely to influence women's fertility intention.[8]

Many studies have shown that women's housework time is affected by various factors such as income, economic development, and education level. Aside from those factors, the influence of social institutions and cultural contexts also should not be overlooked.[9] Studies have shown, for example, that an increase in educational attainment is negatively correlated with the amount of time men and women spend on housework. Income has different effects on housework time for women living in urban and rural areas in China. In general, with the development of society, women's education level and income will affect their attitudes towards housework, but individuals born in different generations still have attitudes, bearing the brand of the time in which they live, towards housework. However, few scholars have paid

*Corresponding Author: wangziming2019usa@163.com

attention to the differences in attitudes of women born in different generations towards housework and the reasons for such differences. Therefore, this paper hopes to explore the concept of housework distribution of married women born in different generations through structured interviews and analyze how this concept is formed.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Time Availability Theory

According to the time availability theory, the division of housework is based on the time availability of family members. The amount of time a household member spends doing housework is relative to the amount of time they spend in the labor market. Because domestic work is done after paid or other important work, the longer a family member spends at work, the less free time he or she has at his or her disposal and the more likely he or she is to do a smaller share of the housework.[10] Becker [11] proposed another possible theory of time availability, one based on the altruism of individuals in the family and the utility function of the family as a whole. The couple negotiates according to the time spent in the labor market and at home, as well as working hours, with the aim of maximizing the utility of the family. Because women and men have comparative advantages in domestic work and income, respectively, the gender division of labor has formed a pattern in which men and women specialize in paid work and domestic work, respectively. [12],[13]

2.2 Economic Autonomy Theory

Economic autonomy theory holds that in a society where individualism prevails, the social behavior of husband and wife is mainly driven by individual interests rather than shared ones.[14] Unlike relative resource theory, it emphasizes absolute income. Regardless of a wife's income relative to her husband, an increase in her absolute income can effectively reduce her time spent doing housework because an increase in absolute income increases the level of economic independence of family members. There are two theoretical mechanisms that have been used to explain this negative relationship between household time and absolute income. One is the buying-out mechanism, which emphasizes the positive relationship between women's income in the household and the "outsourcing" of housework.[15] In other words, when a woman's income is high enough, she has a strong purchasing power of housework substitutes and can reduce her housework time by outsourcing the housework that is attached to her. The second is opting-out. A woman's income in a household may affect her sense of responsibility for housework. Women with higher

incomes may feel less obligated to do housework, even though they do not intend to buy substitutes for housework.[16] This diminished sense of responsibility may be related to the belief that their returns from market labor are higher than those from housework.[15] Eventually, they may choose to quit housework.

2.3 Gender Display

Unlike other theories emphasizing linear relationships and resources, gender display, or deviance neutralization, focuses more on the nonlinear relationship between gender perspectives and female housework. According to the gender display, when the socio-economic status of a wife or husband deviates from the traditional gender image, they will construct a traditional gender image in the field of housework as compensation to maintain their own gender identity.[17] Men and women who deviate from the traditional gender image will change their domestic work behavior. For example, wives who earn more than their husbands increase their time and input in domestic work to maintain their traditional feminine identity and temperament. The dependent husband, on the other hand, displays masculinity and his traditional masculine identity by reducing his commitment to housework.

3. Research method

The qualitative research method is adopted in this paper. The research was carried out in 2023 in Y City, J Province, through the recommendation of friends and relatives and a random selection of samples in various units. Through the recommendation of friends and relatives, individuals who meet the income, age, and marital status required by the research can be more accurately located. In-depth interviews were conducted with 13 married women (as shown in the table 1 below), including five married women born in the 1990s, four married women born in the 1980s, and four married women born in the 1970s. The contents of the interview mainly focused on the time spent on housework at home, attitudes towards housework, the distribution of housework between wives and husbands, and whether they have or are willing to buy housework substitutes. In addition to these 13 women, a brief interview with four other women was also conducted to help judge. At first, the author did not consider the specific division of housework in the family to be included in the scope of interview questions. However, considering that the actual housework behavior may have certain deviations from the consciousness, for example, some interviewees are still the main undertakers of housework even though they think that housework is not the duty of women, this information was eventually taken into consideration, and a return visit was made.

Table 1. Basic Information of Interviewees

Number	Age	Education Background	Occupation	Number of Children	Income
Post-90s 1	29	Bachelor	Civil Servant	0	Less than Husband's

Post-90s 2	28	Bachelor	Civil Servant	1	Less than Husband's
Post-90s 3	32	Bachelor	Civil Servant	1	Less than Husband's
Post-90s 4	32	Junior college	Urban Community Worker	1	More than Husband's
Post-80s 1	37	Bachelor	Deputy Manager of Human Resource Office	1	Less than Husband's
Post-80s 2	35	Master	Teacher	2	Less than Husband's
Post-80s 3	43	Master	Teacher	1	Less than Husband's
Post-80s 4	43	Bachelor	Clothing Merchant	1	More than Husband's
Post-70s 1	46	Junior College	Clerk of Public Institution	1	Less than Husband's
Post-70s 2	48	Junior College	Traditional Media	1	Less than Husband's
Post-70s 3	47	Middle School	Corporate Information Officer	1	More than Husband's
Post-70s 4	45	Middle School	Beautician	2	More than Husband's
Post-70s 5	53	Bachelor	Civil Servant	1	More than Husband's

4. The post-1990s generation pursuing personal happiness

The post-90s professional women, as a comparatively young group of women entering the labor market, have completely different gender concepts and perspectives about housework from the post-70s and post-80s women. They grew up in the context of informatization and pluralism; parents and teachers are no longer the only guides in the construction of their gender perspective.[18] In terms of gender concepts, with the gradually larger impact of gender equality notion in China, women born in the 1990s are significantly less affected by traditional gender concepts than professional women born in the 1970s and 1980s. On the level of housework consciousness, the sense of housework as an obligation of professional women born in the 1990s is less than that of women born in the 1970s and 1980s. In addition, through interviews, it was found that this result was less influenced by the economic level; that is, women's income did not significantly affect their sense of housework obligation.

The post-90s women surveyed, whether their income is lower than that of their husbands or higher than that of their husbands, all believe that housework is not a woman's duty but a common duty of both men and women and even children in the family. The equality of men and women in housework and personal happiness are emphasized. Different from the specialized division of labor mode of "men outside, women inside" under the traditional concept, the cooperative division of labor pursued by post-90s women is more rational and individualistic. "Modern women have begun to participate in the workforce, so why should girls have to worry about family matters alone?" (post-90s respondent 1) Despite earning less than their husbands, respondents did not show a significant sense of housework as an obligation. Even more surprisingly, husbands who earn more in the household are the main undertakers of housework. When asked if she felt pressured by her low participation in

housework, respondents laughed and said no.

The post-90s interviewee 4, whose income is higher than her husband's, also believes that housework is not a woman's responsibility. "My working hours are longer than his (husband's), and I have to take care of children, so I don't have much time to do much housework, so housework is shared, and there is no clear division of labor." (post-90s interviewee 4) In general, despite earning more than her husband and not being the main undertakers of housework, post-90s interviewee 4 did not show a strong willingness to neutralize deviance from the traditional gender image. That is, she does not deliberately undertake more housework to make herself conform to the expectations of traditional society for women. Like the post-90s respondents, who earn less than their husbands, she also seeks relative equality in time and energy spent on housework and coordination between work and work within the family.

At the same time, some post-90s respondents bought smart home appliances to help with housework, "I am very happy to buy substitutes such as range hoods and sweeping robots that can facilitate housework" (post-90s respondent 2). Some post-90s respondents free themselves by buying housekeeping. "I have a maid to clean the house on weekends." (post-90s respondent 3)

In this paper, economic autonomy theory is used to explain the post-90s married women's concept of housework. Lack of willingness and consciousness to neutralize gender deviance is, to a large extent, the result of women's economic independence within the family. Under the guidance of rational thinking, they began to pursue personal happiness in the family instead of blindly pursuing the traditional gender identity expected by traditional society. At the same time, the increasing social status of women has also strengthened the feasibility range of their autonomy. It has to do with their absolute earnings. Although they earn less than their husbands, the gradual reduction in economic dependence on them allows more and more women to "outsource" domestic work. All kinds of domestic services and a large number of emerging smart household labor substitutes are their outsourcing choices.

5. The post-1980s generation bargaining and cooperating with husbands

As the first generation of the "one-child policy" in China, the post-80s have their unique characteristics in the process of socialization and troubles in building their families. At the same time, as a generation between the post-70s and post-90s, the post-80s professional women were living in the stage of high collision between traditional gender concepts and modern gender concepts. They face choices in terms of gender concepts and domestic work. The choice is whether to continue to assume the traditional role of the main domestic work undertaker, to throw themselves into competition and work in the labor market, or to seek a balance between the two. Through the interview, it was found that the gender concept and notions about housework of post-80s women have been relatively modern. However, there are some differences between the concept and consciousness of the post-90s generation and them.

Similar to the post-90s professional women, the post-80s professional women surveyed believe that housework is not a woman's duty, regardless of whether their income is lower than that of their husbands. The cooperative and complementary relationship between husband and wife, when it comes to housework, is emphasized. According to the interview, it was found that the housework of post-80s professional women mainly centers around the availability of time.

"Housework is not a woman's obligation because housework should be shared equally. In my family, anyone who works a hard day will not do housework; for example, anyone who takes care of the children in the morning will not do housework." (post-80s respondent 1) The post-80s interviewee 2 also believes that housework is not a woman's obligation because housework belongs to the family, including adults and children, because everyone owns and uses the home together and should work for the home together. In terms of the division of housework, her family will do a thorough cleaning on weekends. Usually, the one who has free time will be responsible for the housework. Although the post-80s respondent 3 is the main undertaker of household chores, she holds similar opinions. "Because the household is formed by both man and woman, everyone has to do the housework." In terms of division of labor, she undertakes most of the housework, and her husband is mainly responsible for cooking breakfast, while her husband will also do other housework when he has enough time.

The post-80s respondent 4 has a higher income than her husband, and like those born in the 1990s who have a higher income than their husbands, she does not deliberately undertake more housework to make her conform to the traditional social expectations for women; that is, there is no neutralization of gender deviance. Like other post-80s respondents, respondent 4 shares housework with her husband. The argument is that sharing household chores between wife and husband can reduce conflicts and troubles within the family. In addition, she said women are under pressure to have children and work,

and men should share the housework. It can be seen that the gender concept of post-80s women is relatively advanced. But at the same time, a very interesting phenomenon was noticed, that is, the post-80s respondents are far less willing to buy housework substitutes than the post-90s respondents, and they are more inclined to equal division of labor and cooperation based on time availability in both consciousness and behavior. Instead of actively reducing their own housework time by "outsourcing" or making men with more advanced gender concepts take the initiative to undertake housework. This may be due to their relatively weak individualism, or it may be due to it taking time to transition from traditional to modern gender concepts.

6. The post-1970s generation facing the burden of generalist

As an early group of women to enter the labor market, the gender concept of post-70s women is still relatively traditional. They are also more likely to face the dual constraints of domestic work and work when entering the labor market and when juggling multiple identities, including professional women, wives, and mothers. Influenced by traditional gender concepts, many post-70s professional women have to become generalists with the ability to work and do housework. Through interviews, it was found that professional women born in the 1970s care significantly more about housework than those born in the 1980s and 1990s, although they believed that housework was not women's duty. Besides, they are also more likely to be the main undertakers of household chores.

Both post-70s respondents 1 and 2 have lower incomes than their husbands and hold similar views. They all say that housework should not be done by women alone. When asked about the distribution of housework, respondent 1 of the post-1970s generation said: "I, the children, and the husband all have a common part of the obligation: I wash the dishes, wash clothes, sweep the floor. Cooking and buying material is a matter of my husband. My son is occupied by school work, but he can help throw away the garbage and help clean up during the holidays." Post-70s interviewee 2 said: "There are three people in the family, and I do what I am good at, work including weight-carrying is my husband or my son to do, such as more than 20 pounds of heavy objects. Chores like mopping need strength, and my husband will do them. Just do what they are good at. For example, my husband cooks well; if he is free at home, then I buy materials, and he makes food." It is different from the housework distribution factors followed by post-1980s and post-1990s professional women. Women born in the 1970s tend to conform to specialization and assign housework on the basis of ability rather than by time availability or the pursuit of personal happiness. At the same time, because women are more likely to become good at housework after marriage and motherhood, the tendency to distribute according to ability makes them more likely to be the main undertakers of housework.

The income of post-70s respondents 3,4,5 is higher than that of their husbands, among which post-70s

respondents 3 and 5 believe that housework is a woman's duty. The mechanism behind this is closely related to the tendency to allocate housework according to ability and traditional gender concepts. Respondent 3 thinks that housework is a female obligation because housework is a job requiring techniques and patience, and males can hardly do it; it is not as good as women to do it themselves. This view is in line with the post-70s professional women's tendency to distribute housework according to ability. At the same time, this view also shows the interviewee's identification with her female identity and the gender symbols bound to it. Respondent 5 believes that housework is a woman's obligation because the family needs cooperation, and it cannot run without cooperation. However, upon inquiry, it was noticed that this so-called cooperation is not actually fair. From the interview, it was learned that post-1970s respondent 5 is still the main undertaker of housework in the family. When asked if it was too tiring to be responsible for both work and cleaning, she reiterates her concept of "cooperation" and treats housework as her responsibility. This phenomenon may be due to the lag of the traditional cultural model of gender division of labor in which men lead outside, and women lead inside and it does not change synchronously with the change in women's level of economic dependency.[19] In addition, this may also be women's active neutralization of their deviance from the gender expectations of traditional society. Women who earn more than their husbands maintain their sense of femininity by taking on more housework while keeping their behavior in line with society's expectations of femininity.[20] On the contrary, men maintain their gender identity by refusing to do housework. This largely explains why women who earn more than their husbands do more housework eventually.

7. Discussion and Conclusion

In the context of the continuous improvement of social status and increasing economic independence of women in China, more and more women are leaving the family and entering the labor market and higher education. The amount of time women spend on housework, and the attitudes women feel about housework have changed. However, the change did not come in a single wave. Women born in different generations have different attitudes towards housework.

In different time periods, the challenges, opportunities, and social situations faced by women are also different. For example, compared with the post-90s and post-70s, professional women have more opportunities and possibilities to have access to the emerging technological household labor substitutes to further liberate their hands. Or, compared with women born in the 1980s, women born in the 1970s are more likely to be dominated by traditional gender ideas due to the lack of efficient media for information dissemination and access, as well as contact with modern egalitarian ideas during their growth.

In general, post-1990s women emphasize rationality and personal happiness in the family and in the field of housework. This manifestation of individualism and independence is different from the other two generations

that emphasize collaborative relationships. The purpose of collaboration is to maximize the utility of the family as a whole. Among them, the post-80s generation is more inclined to allocate housework according to time availability, and the tendency to actively outsource housework is also smaller than that of the post-90s generation. The collaboration the post-70s generation emphasizes is also different from that of the post-80s generation. The collaboration that the post-70s generation emphasizes is based on ability and traditional gender perspectives. Dominated by traditional gender perspectives, women with higher incomes than their husbands will deliberately increase their housework time to achieve the social and their own recognition of traditional female identity. The tendency to assign according to ability makes them more likely to be the main undertakers of household chores.

References

1. B. A. Shelton and D. John. (1996). The Division of Household Labor. *Annual Review of Sociology* 22(1):299-322.
2. Y. Li. Feminist Analysis of the Compensation System for Household Duties. *Journal of Shandong Women's University*, 2022(4): 77-87.
3. C. Guan, and L. Zuo. Quantifying and Comparing the Economic Value of Unpaid Housework in Beijing. *Comparative Economic & Social Systems*, 2023(5): 141-152
4. Y. Xu, and R. Xin, Structure and Subject Reconstruction under the Context of Family Migration: A Study on Migrant Women's Mothering Practice. *Journal of Social Development* 2021(4): 85-106.
5. Z. Yu. (2022) Analysis of Current Situation of Domestic Labor Division in China. , *Co-Operative Economy & Science*, 2022(23):84-87.
6. Office of the Leading Group for the Fourth Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women. Main Data of the Fourth Survey on the Social Status of Chinese Women. *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies* 2022(1)
7. X. Sun. (2018) How Do Earnings Influence Housework Division of Chinese Couples?. *Chinese Journal of Sociology* 38(5):214-240.
8. Q. Xu. Is Gender Equity Theory Valid in China? – Division of Housework, Intergenerational Parenting and Women's Reproductive Behavior. *Jiangsu Social Sciences* 2021(4):47-58. DOI:10.13858/j.cnki.cn32-1312/c.20210727.006
9. F. Liu. Household Income Management Power and Division of Labor in Housework between Chinese Couples. *Sociological Review of China*, 2022,10(6):82-101
10. S. Feng. Feminization of Housework: A Perspective of Mechanism Explanation. *Journal of Shandong Women's University*, 2022(2):10.

11. G. S. Becker. (1991). *A Treatise on the Family: Enlarged Edition*. Harvard University Press. pp. 30–79.
12. S. Coverman. (1985). Explaining Husbands' Participation in Domestic Labor at Home. *Sociological Quarterly* 26(1):81-87.
13. H. B. Presser. (1994). Employment Schedules among Dual Earner Spouses and the Division of Household Labor by Gender. *American Sociological Review* 59(3):348-364.
14. D. Zore-Maver. (2002). Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gemshem: Individualization: Institutionalized Individualism and its Social and Political Consequences. London: Thousand Oaks/New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2002. With Forewords by Scott Lash and Zygmunt Bauman. *Acta Sociologica*, 45(2), 172-175.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/000169930204500212>
15. A. Killewald. (2011). Opting out and Buying Out: Wives' Earnings and Housework Time. *Journal of Marriage and Family*, 73(2): 459–71.
16. S. Gupta. (2006). Her Money, Her Time: Women's Earnings and Their Housework Hours. *Social Science Research*, 35(4):975–99.
17. M. Bittman, P. England, L. Sayer, N. Folbre, and G. Matheson. (2003). When Does Gender Trump Money? Bargaining and Time in Household Work. *American Journal of Sociology* 109(1):186-214.
18. M. Zhang. (2019). Research on the Housework Division of the "Post-90s"—A Case Study of C County in Jilin Province. Jilin Agricultural University. <http://cdmd.cnki.com.cn/Article/CDMD-10193-1019925688.htm>.
19. A. Liu, X. Tong, and W. Fu. (2015). Household Division of Housework for Double-Income Families: Economic dependence, Gender Ideologies, or Emotional Express?. *Chinese Journal of Sociology*. 35(2):109-136.
20. C. West, and D. H. Zimmerman. (1987). Doing Gender. *Gender and Society* 1(2):125-151.