

Employed parents and the division of housework

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While the division of labour in the paid workforce has been given much attention, the division of labour at home has received less scrutiny. This issue is of particular concern to women because they have traditionally been responsible for housework, and now the majority of them are also facing the demands of a job outside the home. One of the central questions is how, in the midst of employment and parenting responsibilities, families manage domestic chores.

Results of Statistics Canada's 1990 General Social Survey (GSS) [\(1\)](#) show that dual-earner couples employed full-time outside the home are the most likely to share responsibility for housework. Yet even for them, the allocation of household chores is far from equal. Sharing tends to be most common among younger, well-educated couples with few children. The likelihood of shared responsibility increases as the wife's income level rises. As well, the partners' satisfaction with several dimensions of their lives seems to be related to the way they divide responsibility for housework.

Most couples are dual-earners

The balancing of family and job obligations has become a challenge for more Canadian couples than ever before. In 1990, 71% of couples with children aged 18 or younger in the household were dual-earners (both partners had at least some employment outside the home); by contrast, just over 20 years ago, only 30% of such families were dual earners. [\(2\)](#)

In 1990, both the wife and the husband were employed full time in 51% of two-parent families. In 19% of two-parent families, the husband worked full time, and the wife, part time ([Chart A](#)). Single-earner families, in which the husband was employed full time and the wife was at home full time, accounted for 27%. [\(3\)](#)



Chart A The majority of parents worked full time.

Source: *General Social Survey, 1990*

Traditional division of labour

The 1990 GSS showed that the assignment of housework tends to follow traditional patterns. For the purposes of this paper, housework refers to meal preparation, meal clean-up, and cleaning and laundry (See [Defining and measuring housework](#)). Women are likely to assume primary responsibility for these routine tasks, which must be performed on a regular basis and which account for 78% of all housework (see [Time use](#)). On the other hand, men tend to be responsible for repairs, maintenance, and outside work, tasks that must be accomplished less frequently (see [A man's job](#)). Because the 1990 GSS did not ask direct questions about the responsibility for child care, this activity is not directly analyzed in this article. However, the population studied consists only of couples with children at home, and it is generally accepted that children in a household increase the amount of housework.

The extent to which wives are responsible for housework varies with their employment status. As wives' involvement in the workforce increases, their responsibility for housework declines, but their husband's contribution does not increase enough to approach parity ([Table 1](#)). For example, 89% of wives who were not in the labour force were solely responsible for meal preparation; this compared with 86% of wives employed part time and 72% of those employed full time.



Table 1 Primary responsibility for housework of parents under age 65, by employment status of couple, 1990.

Source: *General Social Survey, 1990*

While husbands in full-time, dual-earner families were the most likely of all husbands to assume responsibility for domestic chores, the proportions who did so were relatively low. Meal clean-up was the task that these men most often shared (15%) or did on their own (16%). Slightly fewer shared (12%) or had sole responsibility (13%) for meal preparation. And although 13% of husbands shared the cleaning and laundry, these were the chores that they were least likely to do alone (7%).

There was almost no difference in the degree of responsibility for housework taken on by wives working part time and stay-at-home wives.

Full-time, dual-earning parents

The division of housework by full-time dual - earners deserves particular attention, since half of couples with children aged 18 or younger now fall into this category. These parents generally have less time to devote to domestic chores than do those with other employment patterns. By definition, full-time dual-earners deviate from traditional gender roles because both partners share responsibility for paid work. Therefore, it may be reasonable to expect that they might also deviate from the traditional division of household labour by sharing responsibility for housework.

In reality, this was not the case. In most full-time, dual-earner families, the wife had primary responsibility for housework. [\(4\)](#) The majority (52%) of wives employed full time had all of the responsibility for daily housework, while 28% had most of this responsibility ([Chart B](#)). Only 10% of dual-earning couples shared responsibility for housework equally; in the remaining 10% of couples, the husband had all or most of the responsibility.



Chart B Among full-time dual-earner couples, wives were largely responsible for housework.

Source: General Social Survey, 1990

Who shares ... who doesn't?

Only a small minority of full-time, dual-earning couples had an egalitarian division of housework. What distinguishes these couples from those who do less sharing?

Several characteristics were associated with the likelihood that the husbands would assume greater responsibility for housework - or more precisely, that the wives would not be **solely** responsible ([Chart C](#)). For example, the younger the partners, the less likely was the wife to be solely responsible for housework. The proportion of full-time, dual-earner wives under age 35 who were responsible for all daily housework was 47%, compared with 69% among those aged 45 to 64. The trend was similar according to the husband's age.



Chart C The wife's responsibility for housework varied with the couple's characteristics.

Source: *General Social Survey, 1990*

The number of children in the household also had some bearing on the allocation of domestic responsibilities. The percentage of dual-earner wives with all responsibility for housework increased from 44% of those with one child at home to 83% of those with four or more children. This suggests that when there is additional housework, as is the case with several children at home, women are more likely to do the extra work required.

As well, dual-earner women in common-law unions were somewhat less likely than those in marriages to do all the housework. The wife had sole responsibility for housework in 46% of common-law unions, compared with 52% of marriages.

The educational attainment of both partners was also associated with the allocation of housework: the more educated the couple, the less likely was the wife to assume full responsibility for domestic chores. For instance, in 58% of households where the wife had less than high school graduation, she alone was responsible for daily housework; if she was a university graduate, the corresponding figure was 45%. The trend was similar according to the husband's level of education.

The relationship between domestic responsibility and income differed for wives and husbands. As the wife's income rose, the likelihood that she alone would be responsible for housework declined. By contrast, the higher the husbands's income, the greater was the proportion of wives with all responsibility for housework.

Sharing and satisfaction

The way that full-time dual-earners divide housework appears to be associated with their satisfaction with several aspects of their lives: the allocation of household tasks, the time for other interests, and the balance between work and family. [\(5\)](#)

The majority of dual-earners indicated that they were satisfied with the allocation of housework in their homes. However, the most satisfaction was expressed by wives (98%) and husbands (97%) in households where housework was shared equally ([Chart D](#)). Not surprisingly, spouses with little responsibility for housework also reported high levels of satisfaction (94% or more) with this allocation of duties. On the other hand, lower levels of satisfaction were expressed by spouses who did all the housework: 75% of wives who were responsible for all the domestic chores and 88% of husbands who had most of the responsibility were satisfied with the arrangement.



Chart D **Responsibility for housework affected the personal satisfaction of dual-earner couples.**

Source: *General Social Survey, 1990*

A sizeable proportion of all full-time dual-earners felt that they did not have sufficient time to pursue other interests. Dual-earners' satisfaction with this aspect of their life, however, was also related to their partner's responsibility for housework. The highest satisfaction levels (at least 70%) were reported by spouses with little responsibility for domestic chores. By contrast, just 58% of wives who managed all the housework and 54% of husbands who assumed most responsibility for these tasks were satisfied with the time they had for other activities. Dual-earners who shared housework responsibility also tended to feel pressed for time, as only 58% of wives and 63% of husbands expressed satisfaction with their time for other interests.

The distribution of responsibility for housework did not affect the way dual-earner couples felt about the balance between their job and their family. Regardless of how housework was divided, approximately eight out of ten wives and husbands were satisfied with the balance.

Summary

According to the 1990 General Social Survey, women employed full time have somewhat less responsibility for housework than do women with part-time jobs or those at home full time. But while husbands tend to respond to their wife's working full time by taking a greater role in domestic chores, the division of housework is still far from equal. The majority of wives who are employed full time continue to have all or most of the responsibility for daily household tasks. These women face the double burden of paid work and unpaid housework.

Defining and measuring housework

The data on household work come from Statistics Canada's 1990 General Social Survey on Family and Friends. One section of the questionnaire pertained to four household chores: meal preparation; meal clean-up; house cleaning and laundry; and house maintenance and outside work such as repairs, painting,

carpentry, lawn mowing, and snow removal. For each chore, respondents were asked three questions: 1) who in the household helped with it; 2) how much of the work each person did; and 3) who was primarily responsible for the chore. Multiple responses were allowed for the last question only if the primary responsibility was shared equally.

This article is mainly concerned with the third question - primary responsibility for each chore - because responsibility goes beyond the actual performance of a task to include anticipating, planning, and organizing what needs to be done. It encompasses the management of time, people, and resources. Nonetheless, responsibility for, and actual time spent doing housework are highly correlated.

One respondent reported for all members of each household. Therefore, the data reflect that respondent's perception of how the chores were divided in his or her home. Regardless of who was interviewed, wives were generally acknowledged as having primary responsibility for domestic chores. Not unexpectedly, however, husbands collectively tended to see themselves doing more than wives perceived them doing, and vice versa. For instance, 15% of husbands in full-time, dual-earner families reported that they had sole responsibility for meal preparation, whereas only 10% of wives reported that their husbands were solely responsible for these duties.

For most variables these differences did not matter, as the results were based on the full sample and, therefore, show the averaging of male and female reporting. The single exception was income data. Respondents reported their own income, not that of their spouse. Therefore, the analysis of wives' income and housework is based on female respondents only, which results in a female perspective on the division of domestic labour (the same is true for male income and housework). This produces some bias in the reporting.

The population examined in this article consists of couples, married or common-law, with dependent children aged 18 or younger at home. To be part of the analysis, at least one of the spouses had to be employed. As well, only couples with both partners aged 15 to 64 were included.

Time use

According to the 1986 General Social Survey, meal preparation, meal clean-up, and cleaning and laundry are the household chores performed the most often by Canadians aged 15 and over. These chores have the highest daily participation rates, ranging from 11% for laundry to 51% for meal preparation. Furthermore, these chores accounted for 78% (9 hours and 34 minutes) of the total average time (12 hours and 15 minutes) people spent on household chores each week. It can be argued that the daily, time-consuming household chores are the most difficult ones to manage in combination with full-time paid work.



Table **Participation rate and average time spent on household chores, population aged 15 and over, 1986.**

Source: General Social Survey, 1986

A man's job

While housework tends to be done by women, repairs, maintenance, and yard work are likely to be the responsibility of men. This varies little with the employment status of the partners, although men whose wives stayed at home or worked part time got more assistance with these chores.

In 1990, in 79% of dual-earner families, the husband had sole responsibility for repairs, maintenance, and yard work. The corresponding figure for families with a stay-at-home wife was 77%.

The nature of the responsibility involved in these chores differs from housework. Unlike domestic tasks such as meal preparation, which must be done every day, or laundry, which is typically necessary at least once a week, many repair, maintenance or yard work chores are done annually and often can be delayed indefinitely. As well, it is more common to hire outside help for these jobs than for housework.

Notes

Note 1

The General Social Survey (GSS) was established by Statistics Canada in 1985 to monitor changes in the living conditions and well-being of Canadians, and to provide information on various social issues of current or emerging interest. Data are collected annually from a random sample of households.

Approximately 13,500 persons were interviewed in 1990. The target population consists of all persons aged 15 and over, except full-time residents of institutions and residents of the Yukon and the Northwest Territories. For further information, contact Douglas Norris at (613) 951-2572.

Note 2

The 1967 information is based on unpublished data from the Survey of Consumer Finances, which refer to families with children under age 16.

Note 3

The remaining 3% consisted of dual-earners with the wife working full time and the husband part time or both working part time, and single-earners with the wife employed full time and the husband at home full time. Those respondents who did not state their employment status were also included in this residual category.

Note 4

A point system was used to determine responsibility for housework. Individuals scored a point each time they were acknowledged as having primary responsibility for meal preparation, meal clean-up, and cleaning and laundry. If responsibility for a chore was shared equally, each partner scored a point. Since daily housework consisted of three chores, the maximum score was three points. For example, "wife mostly" comprises scores of W=3 H=2; W=3 H=1; and W=2 H=1.

Note 5

Reports of satisfaction are difficult to interpret. Generally, it is more socially acceptable to be satisfied rather than dissatisfied with one's personal life. Therefore, reported levels of satisfaction may be exaggerated, depending on the nature of the question.

References

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- Statistics Canada. *Where does time go?* General Social Survey Analysis Series. Catalogue 11-612E, no. 4 (August 1991).

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Source

Perspectives on Labour and Income, Autumn 1993, Vol. 5, No. 3 (Statistics Canada, Catalogue 75-001E). This is the fourth of six articles in the issue.

 HIGHLIGHTS

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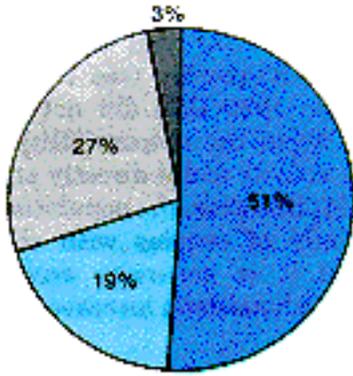
 HELP

 HOME



Chart A

The majority of parents worked full time.



- Husband employed full time and . . .
- . . . wife employed full time
- . . . wife employed part time
- . . . wife not in labour force
- Other * and not stated

Source: *General Social Survey, 1990*

* Includes other work statuses of husbands and wives.

Table 1

Primary responsibility for housework of parents under age 65, by employment status of couple, 1990

Household chore and employment status	Total*	Primary responsibility			
		Wife only	Husband only	Wife and husband share equally	Other**
		%			
Meal preparation					
Dual-earner, both working full time	100	72	13	12	2
Dual-earner, husband full time, wife part time	100	86	7	6	--
Single-earner, husband full time	100	89	5	5	--
Meal clean-up					
Dual-earner, both full time	100	59	16	15	6
Dual-earner, husband full time, wife part time	100	72	9	10	3
Single-earner, husband full time	100	78	7	8	3
Cleaning and laundry					
Dual-earner, both full time	100	74	7	13	3
Dual-earner, husband full time, wife part time	100	86	4	6	--
Single-earner, husband full time	100	86	4	7	--

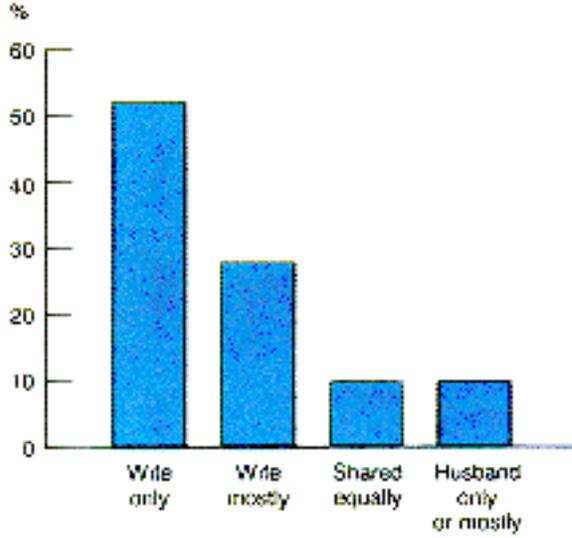
Source: General Social Survey, 1990

* May not add to 100% due to exclusion of non-response.

** Someone other than the wife or husband had primary responsibility for the chore.

Chart B

Among full-time dual-earner couples, wives were largely responsible for housework.

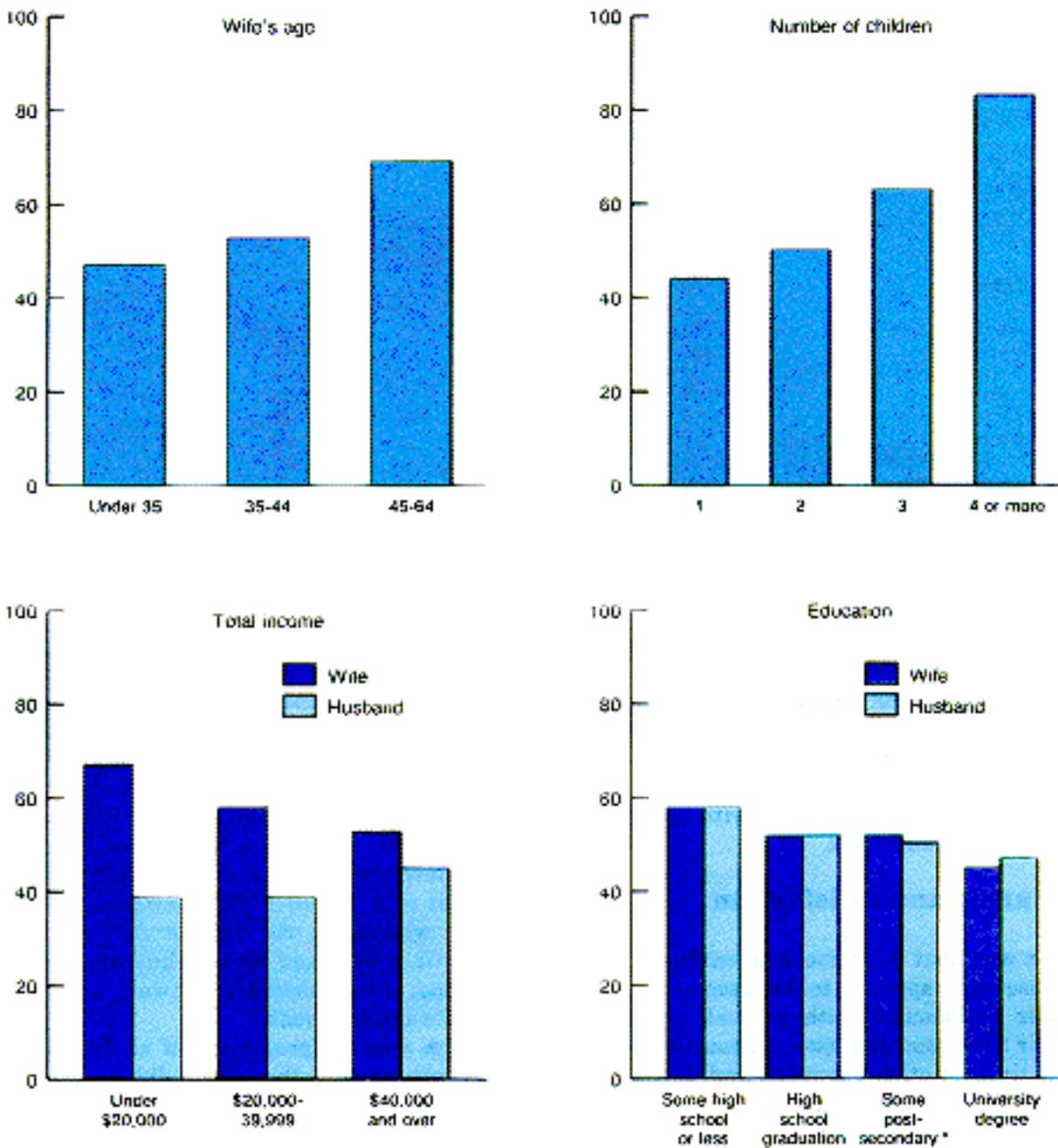


Source: General Social Survey, 1990

Chart C

The wife's responsibility for housework varied with the couple's characteristics.

% of wives in dual-earner couples with sole responsibility for housework

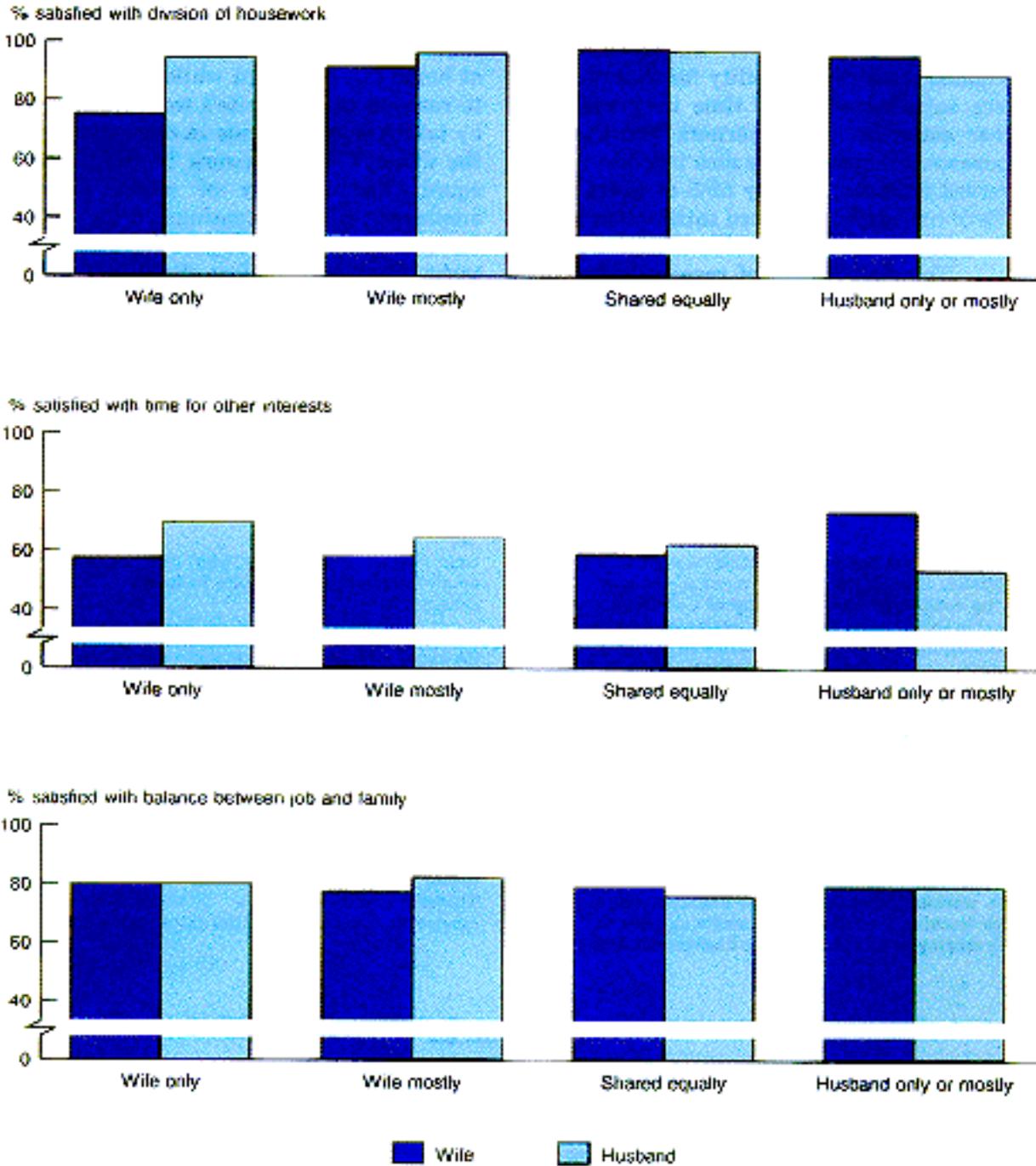


Source: General Social Survey, 1990

* Includes certificates and diplomas.

Chart D

Responsibility for housework affected the personal satisfaction of dual-earner couples.



Source: General Social Survey, 1990

Participation rate and average time spent on household chores, population aged 15 and over, 1986

	Daily participation rate			Time spent per week		
	Both sexes	Men	Women	Both sexes	Men	Women
	%			hours:minutes		
All chores	69	52	85	12:15	6:53	17:30
Meal preparation	51	29	72	3:51	1:24	6:11
Meal clean-up	35	15	54	1:31	:35	2:27
Indoor cleaning	28	10	46	3:09	1:03	5:08
Laundry	11	2	20	1:03	:07	1:59
Other housework	9	7	10	:42	:42	:42
Home repairs	6	9	2	1:03	1:45	:21
Gardening/pet care	5	5	5	:14	:21	:14
Outdoor cleaning	4	7	2	:28	:56	:14
Domestic travel	2	2	1	:07	:07	:07
Mending	1	0	2	:07	:00	:14

Source: General Social Survey, 1986