

Gender roles

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British Social Attitudes 40



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Change and continuity at work and at home

Significant shifts to women's participation in the labour market have taken place in the 40 years since the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey began, with mothers' participation the highest it has ever been and with a slight majority of working mothers now working full time. In addition, policy developments mean that the provision of childcare, and to a lesser extent parental leave, is more likely to facilitate female labour market participation than has been the case in the past. Given these changes, this chapter examines how attitudes and behaviour in relation to men's and women's roles at work and at home have changed over the past four decades.



Decline in support for a traditional division of labour

Support for a traditional division of working and caring roles has declined markedly since 1983, while support for women's participation in the labour force has increased.

- Agreement that a man's job is to earn money and a woman's is to look after the home and family has declined by 39 percentage points since 1987, from 48% to 9% in 2022.
- Only around 1 in 10 (12%) people now agree that 'a job is all right but what most women really want is a home and children,' compared to 1 in 3 (31%) in 1989.
- Agreement with the view that a pre-school child is likely to suffer if his/her mother works has declined from 46% in 1989 to 21% now.

Increasing support for both parents working when children are young

People are more likely to support arrangements for caring for pre-school children which involve both parents working, compared with a decade ago.

- In 2012, 31% felt the best arrangement with pre-school children was for the mother to stay at home and the father to work full time; 18% now think this.
- There has been a significant growth in the belief that both the mother and father working part time is the best option; support for this view more than tripled from 5% in 2012 to 18% now.
- However, the most frequently selected preference for organising work and care while children are small is the mother working part time and the father working full time (33%).

Behaviour in division of domestic labour has not shifted in line with attitudes

While attitudes increasingly support the sharing of household chores, women continue to do more domestic labour than men.

- 63% of women report doing more than their fair share of household labour, compared with 22% of men.
- Women are more likely to do the washing and ironing: 65% say that this is mainly done by the woman, compared to 27% who say it is shared equally and 7% who report that it is mainly done by the man. Yet, 76% think that this task should be shared equally and just 16% think it should be mainly performed by the woman.