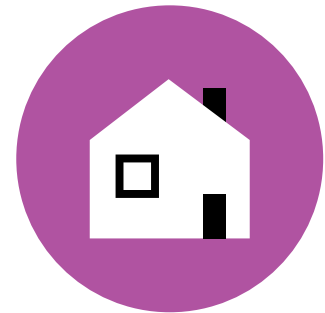


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# Domestic work: attitudes and behaviour

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We have seen in the previous sections that people’s attitudes to women’s and men’s roles in relation to work and caring have become more egalitarian over the past four decades. We might therefore logically expect a similar change in relation to attitudes to, and behaviour regarding, domestic work within the home. It is on this topic which the remainder of the chapter focuses.



Since 1984, the BSA has periodically measured attitudes to domestic labour by asking respondents whether six distinct household tasks should be undertaken by “mainly the man”, “mainly the woman”, or whether they should be “shared equally”. The six tasks asked about are listed in Table 8, along with the proportions who selected each answer option on each occasion since 1984 that the question has been asked.

Over the last 40 years, attitudes towards domestic work have clearly become more egalitarian. In 1984, views on the divisions of labour largely aligned with traditional gender roles, however these views have shifted considerably. In 2022, irrespective of the household task asked about, a majority of people consider that the responsibility to carry it out should be shared between the man and the woman.

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Aligning with gender stereotypes, in 1984, women were predominantly seen as being responsible for meal preparation, cleaning, and washing and ironing whereas men were seen as being responsible for household repairs. Household shopping and organising household payments and bills were viewed as jobs that should be shared. Over the years, views have become more progressive for all tasks, for instance: 75% of people in 1984 thought that the responsibility for washing and ironing should mainly lie with the woman; today, 76% think that this task should be shared. However, there is evidence of some stereotypes enduring: while 55% believe that household repairs should be shared, 32% retain the view that these should mainly be performed by the man (a view expressed by 78% in 1984).

Opinions differ marginally between men and women across all years (as shown in Table A.2 and Table A.3 in the appendix). However, in general women are, and have been, more likely to hold the attitude that household tasks should be shared equally. The biggest difference can be seen in attitudes towards household repairs. Women were more likely to report that the chore should be shared across all years, with the largest gender gap in attitudes in 2022, where 61% of women support shared responsibility, compared with 48% of men. These findings suggest that, alongside significant departures in attitudes towards conventional gender roles, women are more likely to reject traditional gender role beliefs than men.

**Table 8 Attitudes toward who should undertake household tasks, 1984-2022**

	1984	1987	1991	2022
<b>Household shopping</b>	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	0	1	1	2
Mainly the woman	34	30	22	9
Shared equally	63	68	76	82
<b>Makes the evening meal</b>	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	1	0	1	1
Mainly the woman	57	52	39	10
Shared equally	38	44	57	80
<b>Household cleaning</b>	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	0	1	1	1
Mainly the woman	49	44	36	9
Shared equally	48	54	62	82
<b>Washing and ironing</b>	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	0	0	0	1
Mainly the woman	75	69	58	16
Shared equally	22	30	40	76
<b>Household repairs</b>	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	78	73	66	32
Mainly the woman	2	1	1	1
Shared equally	19	24	31	55
<b>Organises the household money and bill payments</b>	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	21	22	17	9
Mainly the woman	16	15	14	5
Shared equally	59	61	66	78
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1675</i>	<i>1437</i>	<i>1473</i>	<i>1063</i>

Have these shifts in attitudes translated into changes in what happens in practice? The BSA survey has explored this issue in two ways. First of all, since 2002, respondents have been asked their views regarding whether or not they do a fair share of the housework, with the available response options, and the data collected in relation to this item, presented in Table 9.

A number of patterns are evident. For women, the most consistently selected response has been that they do more than their fair share of the housework, with around 6 in 10 declaring this across all three years for which data has been collected. The responses provided by men also suggest that they do less than their fair share of housework (and consequently that women do more) although this view has declined over time (whilst it has not among women). So, in 2002 we see that 44% of men reported doing less than their fair share of housework whilst, today, 32% report this. This affirms the notion that, even though there is a prevailing belief (noted above) that household work should be split equally, in practice, women and, to a lesser extent, men, view the distribution of household labour to be unjust.

**Table 9 Self-reported share of housework by sex, 2002-2022**

	2012		2018		2022	
	M	F	M	F	M	F
I do more than my fair share of the housework	10	63	15	60	22	63
I do roughly my fair share of the household work	45	31	46	31	46	30
I do less than my fair share of housework	44	4	37	6	32	7
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	<i>527</i>	<i>619</i>	<i>311</i>	<i>263</i>	<i>694</i>	<i>817</i>

Base: Respondents married, in a civil partnership or living with a partner

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Similarly, when we ask men and women living in heterosexual couples what actually happens in relation to the six household tasks presented in Table 8, we see a considerable disparity between what people say should happen, and what happens in practice<sup>8</sup>. Table 10 presents data reporting who typically undertakes each household task today, and on each previous occasion that this question has been asked. Whilst the degree of gendered division in household chores within heterosexual couples has diminished over the past four decades, when looking at who typically undertook each task in 2022, none of the tasks receives “shared equally” as the most common response. The responses reiterate that women are still largely responsible for the majority of unpaid domestic work. In more than half of households, women mainly handle cleaning, laundry and meal preparation, all stereotypically feminine tasks. On the other hand, the smallest shift in gendered practice can be seen in who does the household repairs, which remains as the man’s domain (in 77% of households, this task was mainly performed by men in 2022).

Interestingly, the data reveals that, in relation to certain tasks, less equity is displayed in practices in 2022, compared even to attitudes regarding what should happen in 1984. For instance, in 1984, 34% of people believed that women should take charge of household shopping, while 63% endorsed shared responsibility. However, today, a slightly higher proportion (43%) report that women predominantly take care of the shopping, compared with those who report that this task is shared (41%).

Nevertheless, albeit at a much slower rate than has occurred in relation to attitudes, there have been marked decreases in the proportions of people reporting that women are mainly in charge of most of the specific tasks. These decreases correspond to increases in these household chores being shared, accompanied by smaller increases in households where mainly the man is responsible for them. Though there is still a large gender disparity, those reporting washing and ironing is mainly done by the woman declined from 88% in 1984 to 65% now. During the same period, those stating that laundry is shared has tripled from 9% to 27%, while those attributing the main responsibility to the man increased seven-fold to 7% in 2022.

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<sup>8</sup> It is important to note here that we cannot rule out the possibility that the difference between attitudes and practices is the result of asking different groups. While the questions about who *should* carry out each task were asked of all respondents, we have not disaggregated data by those in partnerships and those not in partnerships. In comparison, the questions about who *does* carry out each chore have been asked only of people in couples. It could be possible that the contrast between attitudes and practices is therefore the result of different values held by those in partnerships and those not in partnerships.

**Table 10 Household tasks undertaken by men and women, 1984-2022<sup>9</sup>**

	1984	1987	1991	1994	2002	2006	2012	2022
<b>Household shopping<sup>10</sup></b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	6	7	8	6	8	8	9	16
Mainly the woman	54	50	45	41	45	41	45	43
Shared equally	39	43	47	52	45	47	43	41
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1120</i>	<i>1005</i>	<i>912</i>	<i>601</i>	<i>1146</i>	<i>1147</i>	<i>598</i>	<i>678</i>
<b>Makes the evening meal<sup>11</sup></b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	5	6	9	4	11	11	15	18
Mainly the woman	77	77	70	59	58	58	55	54
Shared equally	16	17	20	35	29	27	27	26
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1120</i>	<i>1005</i>	<i>912</i>	<i>601</i>	<i>1146</i>	<i>1147</i>	<i>598</i>	<i>678</i>
<b>Household cleaning</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	3	4	4	n/a	5	6	8	9
Mainly the woman	72	72	68	n/a	59	58	57	54
Shared equally	23	23	27	n/a	29	30	29	30
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1120</i>	<i>1005</i>	<i>912</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>1146</i>	<i>1147</i>	<i>599</i>	<i>678</i>
<b>Washing and ironing<sup>12</sup></b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	1	2	3	1	6	5	6	7
Mainly the woman	88	88	84	79	78	74	70	65
Shared equally	9	9	12	18	15	17	20	27
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1120</i>	<i>1005</i>	<i>912</i>	<i>601</i>	<i>1146</i>	<i>1147</i>	<i>600</i>	<i>678</i>

9 In 1994 and earlier, the answer categories were “always the woman”, “usually the woman”, “equal or both” “usually the man” and “always the man”. From 2002 onwards, answer categories were “always me”, “usually me”, “about equal” and “usually spouse/partner”. The data presented in the table has been re-classified so that all years match the original question. In 2022, respondents were able to state the gender of their partner for the first-time: only those in heterosexual relationships have been included in the data for table 10.

10 From 1994 to 2012 this question asked “who shops for groceries”.

11 In 1994 this question asked “who decided what to have for dinner”.

12 From 1994 to 2012 this question asked “who does the laundry”.

**Table 10 Household tasks undertaken by men and women, 1984-2022**

	1984	1987	1991	1994	2002	2006	2012	2022
<b>Household repairs</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	83	82	82	75	71	73	75	77
Mainly the woman	6	6	6	5	7	8	8	6
Shared equally	8	8	10	18	17	14	10	11
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1120</i>	<i>1005</i>	<i>912</i>	<i>601</i>	<i>1146</i>	<i>1147</i>	<i>596</i>	<i>678</i>
<b>Organises the household money and bill payments</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Mainly the man	32	32	31	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	39
Mainly the woman	38	38	40	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	32
Shared equally	28	30	28	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	29
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1120</i>	<i>1005</i>	<i>912</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>n/a</i>	<i>678</i>

Base: Respondents living in heterosexual couples  
n/a = not available

NB: Percentages do not add up to 100 as we have not shown responses for “someone else”, “other” and “can’t choose”

In summary then, we find that views in relation to domestic labour are far more egalitarian than they were 40 years ago, and a majority of people believe that most household tasks should be shared equally. Yet, when it comes to what happens in practice, both men and women report an imbalance in how much domestic labour they perform, with women tending to report more domestic work, both in general and in relation to most specific categories of task. Such a pattern indicates that a significant transformation in gender roles within the household – the second part of the gender revolution (Goldscheider et al., 2015) – has yet to reach its full potential in the UK.