

Who is Doing the Housework in Chinese Families in Malaysia?

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ABSTRACT

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There are limited studies focusing on the amount of time spent on housework and the predictors that influence men's share of weekly housework time relative to their spouses in Chinese families in Malaysia. Quantitative empirical data on the housework time shouldered by couples in Chinese families and the predictors that influence men's share of weekly housework time relative to their spouses in Chinese families have not been possible due to the lack of a time use survey and no available data in Malaysia. This study adopts a quantitative approach to examine the amount of time spent on housework in Chinese families in Malaysia. Also, it examines the predictors that influence men's share of weekly housework time relative to their spouses in the Chinese families. Using an online survey (n = 283 female respondents), the findings indicated that housework was shouldered by Chinese women rather than men, with women spending approximately 5 hours and 13 minutes per week more than men in Chinese families. The findings suggest that men shared less than half of the housework tasks at home with their spouses. In addition, the findings suggest that men increased their share of housework tasks when their spouses earned more than them. This implies that negotiation occurs within Chinese couples with women using their earnings to bargain out of housework. In sum, the findings revealed that although Chinese wives shouldered most of the housework tasks, they could bargain out from the housework and do less housework if they earned more than their husbands.

Contribution/Originality: This study is one of very few studies which have investigate the amount of housework time and the predictors that affect men's share of housework time relative to their spouses in Chinese families in Malaysia. This study contributes to the existing literature in gender inequality in the division of housework.

1. Introduction

Housework is considered unfavorable domestic labour, and it is done without the monetary rewards by the household members. Housework constitutes a burden for

married working women, as research indicates that domestic responsibilities are predominantly perceived as women's tasks rather than men's (Boo, 2021; Choong & Tan, 2018; Noor, 1999). Numerous previous studies indicate that women continue to bear the majority of household responsibilities, despite achieving higher educational attainment, participating in paid employment, and possessing the capacity to generate income (Choong et al., 2019; Ministry of Women Family and Community Development and the United Nations, 2014). This has resulted in gender imbalance in the allocation of housework, with men and women in households failing to participate or allocate time equitably to this unpaid domestic labour (Dotti Sani, 2014; Sayer, 2016).

Previous research contends that an unequal distribution of household labour adversely affects women's subjective well-being and emotional states (Aziz et al., 2018; David Chelliah et al., 2023). Women's discontent with their partner's involvement in household chores may result in disputes and marital discord (David Chelliah et al., 2023; Ismail & Said, 1999). Furthermore, women sometimes compromise their professions by participating in part-time employment and earning less due to the pressure of household responsibilities (Antonopoulos & Hirway, 2010). The disproportionate allocation of domestic labour is a worldwide concern, underscored by Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 5, which emphasises the significance of gender equality. SDG 5.4 underscores the acknowledgement of domestic labour and advocates for a more equitable distribution of unpaid household responsibilities between men and women.

Several studies on domestic labour indicate that women predominantly bear the burden of housework compared to males in Malaysian households (Bakar & Abdullah, 2013; DaVanzo & Lee, 1978; Mazidah et al., 1979; Noor, 1999). In the past, Mazidah and colleagues (1979) discovered that men predominantly allocated their time to agricultural activities and did not engage in domestic chores. Similarly, three decades later, Abu Bakar and Abdullah (2013) found that men did not allocate time to household chores if their partner was not employed. However, research indicates that men increased their domestic labour when women participated in paid jobs and dedicated more hours to their professional career (Abu Bakar & Abdullah, 2013).

Working women dedicated approximately 3 hours and 10 minutes daily to housework, while men allocated around 1 hour and 21 minutes to housework (Noor, 1999). In addition, the past research discovered that women in Sarawak dedicated approximately 4 hours and 14 minutes daily to housework, while men allocated around 1 hour and 57 minutes to the housework (Wee et al., 2004). Previous studies indicated that women dedicated more than double the daily duration to housework tasks compared to men within homes.

Only one previous study examined the factors influencing housework duration in Malaysian families (DaVanzo & Lee, 1978). This research was undertaken four decades ago. This study identified family size, the presence of younger children in families, education, paid work hours, and ethnicity as significant factors affecting housework time. The study indicated that a higher family size and the presence of younger children augmented the total time dedicated to housework. Furthermore, the elevated educational attainment of spouses correlates with increased time spent on housework, as they engage in white-collar occupations necessitating the use of clean and formal attire. Nonetheless, all other factors remaining constant, women reduced their housework duration as their hours in paid employment increased. Moreover, Chinese individuals are observed to allocate less time to household chores compared to Malays.

The scarcity of studies analysing the amount of housework and the predictors influencing its distribution in Chinese families constrains the comprehension of this division, as scholars contend that ethnicity is significant when investigating housework distribution in the Malaysian context (DaVanzo & Lee, 1978).

1.1. Research Objectives

The research objectives of this study include: (1) to examine the amount of time spent on housework per week by gender, and (2) to explore the predictors that influence men's share of weekly housework time relative to their spouses in the Chinese families in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Theories that are used to explain the division of housework

There are three prominent theories that are used to understand the gender inequalities in the division of housework, which include: (1) time availability; (2) relative resources; and (3) gender theories. Apart from these three theories, limited studies found that the strength of religiosity is related to the division of housework.

First, the time availability theory posits that the allocation of household labour is determined by a rational process of who has greater availability for such tasks, irrespective of gender (Coverman, 1985). There are four important variables that are commonly used to measure time availability, which are employment status, paid work hours, number of children, and age of children. Full-time job diminishes the time allocated for household chores. One spouse employed full-time will allocate less time to household chores than the spouse employed part-time. Similarly, a spouse who is not employed typically dedicates more time to household chores than their employed counterpart. Subsequent research has identified an inverse correlation between hours spent in paid employment and time allocated to household chores. A spouse engaged in prolonged paid employment will have diminished time for household chores compared to a spouse with shorter paid work hours (Bianchi et al., 2000; Sayer, 2016). Conversely, previous studies indicate that an individual's paid job hours correlate positively with their spouse's housework time (Brines, 1993; Dotti Sani, 2014). For example, when women increase their paid work time, their husbands tend to spend more time on housework (Bianchi et al., 2000; Brines, 1993) and conversely (Dotti Sani, 2014). Also, the number of children at home means additional housework time for both spouses, and the younger the child, the extra housework time required (Hewitt et al., 2011). It should be noted that the effects are more on women rather than men (Bianchi et al., 2000).

Second, the relative resources theory underscores the division of household labour as a rational process resulting in a "fair" exchange between partners (Blood & Wolfe, 1960). Two significant variables frequently utilised to assess relative resources are income and educational level. Individuals with higher income levels compared to their spouses are anticipated to possess greater bargaining power, which they utilise to negotiate or escape household chores through the negotiation process (Brines, 1994). For example, wives who bring more income resources to the family are expected to engage less in housework compared to their husbands (Knudsen & Wærness, 2008; Pinto & Coltrane, 2009). Some studies indicate that wives engage in more housework when they earn a

higher income than their husbands, as husbands often decrease their housework to preserve their masculinity and traditional gender roles, while women tend to increase their housework to uphold their femininity and traditional gender roles (Brines, 1994). Research indicates an inverse correlation between educational attainment and the duration of housework, suggesting that wives with higher education levels tend to adopt more egalitarian gender role attitudes, resulting in a reduced engagement in housework compared to their less educated counterparts (Coverman, 1985; Presser, 1994).

Third, gender theory posits that the allocation of household labour is not founded on rational decision-making, hence contradicting the ideas of time availability and relative resources. Individuals are socialised to fulfil their gender roles and are anticipated to act in accordance with the established gender norms on the distribution of household labour (Cunningham, 2001). In the gender theory, it predicts that women who hold more traditional gender ideologies tend to do more housework compared to those who hold more egalitarian gender ideologies (Coltrane, 2000; Knudsen & Wærness, 2008). In contrast, men who hold traditional gender views typically engage in less housework than those with egalitarian gender ideologies (Coltrane, 2000). Nevertheless, several research have shown no correlation between gender beliefs and the duration of chores (Bianchi et al., 2000).

Fourth, limited studies found that the strength of religiosity is negatively associated with housework time in Christianity religion in Western countries (Ludwig, 2010; Voicu et al., 2009). This means that those who are more religious tend to do less housework. However, in Islamic religion, a small number of researchers found contradicted results, which suggest that the strength of religiosity is positively associated with housework time in those Islamic countries (Boo, 2018; Hatun, 2013; Zang, 2012).

Given the inconsistency of previous findings regarding the division of housework across different countries and cultural contexts, it is essential for this study to analyse the weekly time couples allocate to housework and the predictors that affect men's contribution relative to women's in Malaysian Chinese families.

3. Research Methods

In this quantitative study, purposive sampling and convenience sampling were used to recruit respondents because there were no time-use surveys conducted in Malaysia and no existing data available. The inclusion criteria were Chinese married couples aged between 20 to 50 years old with a child aged below 12 years in the household. This study excluded those Chinese married couples who live with other additional adults, such as parents and domestic helpers. The exclusion criteria were set because additional adults may increase or decrease the housework time spent by couples (Van Der Lippe et al., 2018).

The sample was recruited through an online platform. The online survey comprised research information, information related to informed consent, demographic characteristics, the total time spent per week on housework, paid work hours, income, the number and age of children, gender ideology, and the strength of religiosity. These essential elements was created based on some items from the International Social Survey Programme 2008 and 2012 (International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) Research Group, 2016, 2018) and Australia Time Use Survey 2006 (Australian Bureau of

[Statistics, 2006](#)). This study utilised pre-existing questionnaires with modifications made to the demographic questions to suit the Malaysian setting.

In the online survey, respondents are asked to act as a proxy in reporting information on their spouse's behalf. A total of 283 female respondents were obtained through a 10-week period. The sample size was determined based on voluntarily participation and the sample recruiting process stopped when no more new respondents responded to it. The reason that women were asked to be the proxy in reporting information on their spouse's behalf is because men tend not to take part in research related to private spheres.

3.1. Analysis approach

In this study, there are three analyses conducted. First, a descriptive analysis was conducted to describe the characteristics of the sample. Second, to achieve the first research objectives, a t-test was conducted to examine the association between the amount of housework time per week by gender. For the third research objective, a multivariate OLS regression was used to examine the predictors that influence men's share of weekly housework time relative to their spouses in Chinese families. In the multivariate OLS regression, the dependent variable is the men's share of weekly housework time relative to their spouses. The dependent variable was computed from men's weekly housework time divided by the total of the spouses and multiplied by 100. The independent variables include all measures highlighted by the three theories, including time availability theory (paid work hours, number of children, and age of children), relative resources theory (income and educational attainment), gender theory (gender ideology), age, and religiosity.

4. Results

[Table 1](#) presents the sample characteristics. Chinese couples averagely have 1.68 children at home who are averagely less than 3 years old. This means that Chinese couples have a smaller family size with young children. In general, women aged around 33 years old and men aged around 36 years old, which means that women are younger than men. Women have higher educational attainment than men. Men worked approximately 52 hours per week, and women worked approximately 28 hours per week. This means that men tend to spend longer hours in paid work and women spend less time in paid work. Moreover, men earned RM4890.5 monthly and women earned RM2738.5 monthly, which means men earned higher income than women. In terms of the strength of religiosity, women are more religious than men in the Chinese families. Women are found to have egalitarian gender role ideologies in this study.

Table 1: Descriptive Characteristics for Chinese Couples

	Mean	SD
Men's age	36.38	5.34
Women's age	33.76	4.71
Men's paid work hours (week)	52.01	12.03
Women's paid work hours (week)	28.28	20.55
Number of children	1.68	0.71
Age of children	2.86	2.78
Men's monthly income (RM)	4890.5	1867.13
Women's monthly income (RM)	2738.5	2153.79

Women's proportion of household income	0.32	0.21
Men's years of education	14.40	3.23
Women's years of education	15.18	2.21
Men's religiosity score ^a	14.87	4.01
Women's religiosity score ^a	15.92	3.42
Women's gender role ideology ^b	34.32	4.40

^aRange 5 = less religious to 25 = very religious

^bRange 8 = less egalitarian to 40 = very egalitarian

Next, moving to the first research objective, a t-test result shows that there is a significant difference in the total housework time spent by gender. Chinese men spent approximately 3 hours and 46 minutes per week on housework, whereas women spent approximately 8 hours and 59 minutes per week on housework. In short, women spent double the amount of housework time compared to men in Chinese families. This finding is consistent with the two past studies in Malaysia that focused on Malay families (Noor, 1999) and families in Sarawak (Wee et al., 2004). It should be noted that the total housework time spent by men and women per day for this study seems reduced if we compare the total time on housework spent by women and men found in the two past studies (Noor, 1999; Wee et al., 2004). However, it should be noted that ethnicity might play a role, as past studies argue that ethnicity matters in that Chinese tend to spend less housework time than Malays (DaVanzo & Lee, 1978).

In the multivariate OLS regression, Table 2 shows results for men's share of housework time relative to their spouses. Women's proportion of household income is the only predictor that is found to be significantly associated with men's share of housework time relative to their spouses. Other predictors that were associated with the division of housework in the past research were found not related to the division of housework in Chinese families in Malaysia. For example, DaVanzo and Lee (1978) found that family size, the presence of younger children in households, education, and paid work hours influenced the division of housework in Malaysian families; however, this study found that none of the predictors are associated with the division of housework in Chinese families in Malaysia.

Table 2: OLS Regression Analysis for Men's Share of Housework Time Relative to Their Spouses

	Coeffβ	se
Men's age	-0.25	0.24
Men's paid work hours (week)	-0.12	0.10
Women's paid work hours (week)	0.09	0.10
(One child = reference group)		
Two children	-2.16	2.34
Three children	-1.20	3.58
(Youngest child 0 to 4 years = reference group)		
Youngest child 5 to 12 years	-2.56	3.16
Men's monthly income (RM)	1.98	3.09
Women's proportional of household income	26.04**	10.07
Men's years of education	-0.31	0.61
Educational difference	1.16	0.67
Men's religiosity score	0.29	0.37
Women's religiosity score	-0.05	0.43
Women's gender role ideologies	0.07	0.26

R-squared	0.16
Number of observations	283

Note: **p<.01

Table 2 shows that men's share of housework time relative to their spouse is significantly associated with women's proportion of household income, as highlighted in the relative resources theory. The finding supports the notion that division of housework among Chinese couples is shaped by power dynamics based on the relative income earnings each partner brings into the household (Blood & Wolfe, 1960; Brines, 1994). The result implies that negotiations occur within Chinese couples with women using their earnings to bargain out of housework.

In summary, the distribution of household labour in Chinese families is gendered, with women doing a greater share of domestic responsibilities than males. This study only found one predictor that influenced men's share of housework time relative to their spouses, and other predictors found in the past studies have no association with men's share of housework time relative to their spouse in Chinese families. The finding implies that contextual differences matter when studying the division of housework.

5. Conclusion

In sum, this study shows that gender inequality in the division of housework can be seen in Chinese families in Malaysia even though women obtained higher education attainment than men and hold more egalitarian gender ideologies. The findings provide the first quantitative evidence of the amount of housework time spent by couples and the predictors that affect men's share of housework time relative to their spouses in Chinese families in Malaysia. It could be argued that Chinese women shouldered double housework time compared to men in the households. However, Chinese women can negotiate and reduce their housework time if they earn more income than their spouse. This study has methodological limitations in that it has a small sample size, and the sample size belonged to the online population. Also, it used women as the proxy to answer information on their spouse behalf due to poor responses from men during the data collection process. Future research could extend this study by examining both Chinese men's and women's housework time by including a larger sample size. Moreover, future research could extend this research by examining men's and women's perspectives and experiences in the housework.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Ethics approval was given by the University of New South Wales before the data collection (Approval No. HC11272). All procedures performed in this study involving human participants were conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the institutional research committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants according to ethical guidelines and standards.

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Conflict of Interests

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