

WHO DOES THE DISHES?

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INTRODUCTION

This article focuses on everyday life practices of twelve lesbian couples and the division of housework in their same-sex households. The article presents qualitative research findings exploring the division of housework in lesbian relationships in three Central-European countries, and examining some of the factors underlying this division.¹ The findings were gained by analysing in-depth interviews conducted with twelve lesbian couples:² 6 couples from Slovakia, 3 from the Czech Republic and 3 from Hungary.³

There is extensive literature covering the topics of equality, relationship satisfaction, and role division among lesbian and gay couples (Tanner 1978; Peplau 1981; Lynch and Reilly 1985/86; Peplau and Cochran 1990; Johnson 1990; Weston 1991; Basow 1992; Huston and Schwartz 1996; Dunne 1997). These authors suggest that gay and lesbian couples share the household tasks rather equally and show great role flexibility in the arrangements of housework, whereas heterosexual couples tend to di-

¹ The research was conducted as part of my MA thesis. For more detailed analysis see Kukučková (2005).

² Three out of the twenty four women identified themselves as bisexual and one as a "slightly bisexual lesbian." Nevertheless, I decided to use the term "lesbian couples" since the majority of women (20) identified themselves as lesbians and since all of them are currently in a lesbian relationship with another woman.

³ I found my Slovak respondents via the Altera and Podisea lesbian organizations, Hungarians via the Labrisz lesbian organization and the contact with couples in the Czech Republic was established through Podisea's mailing list. Except for one case all the interviews were conducted in April 2005 in the cities where these women live. The first part of the interviews with Dori (31, HU) and Kamila (30, HU) were conducted separately in November 2004. They answered additional questions by e-mail in April 2005. I asked my respondents for permission to tape the interviews assuring them that no one will have access to the recordings except me. Moreover, I told them that their names will be changed in order to preserve their anonymity. The interviews took from half an hour to one hour, 45 minutes on average. I asked an average of 27 open-ended questions related to the topic of the division of housework. I decided to interview both partners in each couple in order to gain information from both sides and thus be able to see their division of housework as a whole. Additionally, this enabled me to identify possible discrepancies that might occur in their responses.



vide tasks along traditional gendered lines—women do more housework, men pay for more items (Peplau and Spalding 2000). Moreover lesbians and gays were found to be less traditional not only in the division of housework but also in childcare compared with heterosexual couples (Peplau and Gordon 1982, Peplau 1982, Schneider 1986, Peplau and Cochran 1990, Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam 2005).

Most of this literature has been written in the US and in the UK. While these topics have not been much addressed in Central and Eastern Europe, my analysis of interviews conducted in three Central-European countries agrees with the thesis that there is a high level of equality in the division of housework in lesbian relationships.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A lot of research has been done on the division of housework in heterosexual households. Authors usually distinguish “women’s work” from “men’s work,” where women’s work is the work done mostly by women such as cooking, housecleaning, laundry, shopping and caring for children. “Men’s work,” on the other hand, is usually described as gardening, car maintenance and repair work in the household (Blair and Lichter 1991; Hiller and Philliber 1986; Kamo 1988; Presser 1994; Lindsey 1997; Hochschild 2003; Robinson and Godbey 1997). In this article I also employ these terms together with “feminine tasks” and “masculine tasks” when referring to the traditional gendered division of housework.

Previous research findings indicate that the distribution of domestic work in heterosexual households is rather unequal (Stafford, Backman, and Dibona 1977; Hochschild 2003; Shelton and John 1996; Blair and Lichter 1991; Presser 1994). This is also true for “dual-earner” families where women are in full-time employment. Although men and women often share some of the household chores, women still end up doing the majority of housework (Shelton and John 1996). As Hochschild (2003) describes in her influential book *The Second Shift*, “[e]ven when couples share more equitably the work at home, women do two-thirds of the *daily* jobs at home, like cooking and cleaning up—jobs that fix them into a rigid routine” (Hochschild 2003, 8–9). This suggests that women have to do household work as part of their daily routine, while men have more control over the time they devote to housework. Hochschild also states that women more often do two things at once, while men do either one thing or another, and “also do fewer of the ‘undesirable’ household chores: fewer wash toilets and scrub the bathroom” (Hochschild 2003, 9).



Since men are traditionally perceived as the primary breadwinners, “the needs of a husband in a traditional marriage come first, including rest and relaxation in nonworking hours” (Allen and Webster 2001, 900). Women remain responsible for the majority of household chores, “while their wage-earning activity is viewed as supporting or supplementing the primary breadwinner’s efforts” (Allen and Webster 2001, 900). Furthermore, a man’s career is often perceived as more important than the woman’s, and hence it is more likely that the family will adjust to the demands of the man’s work (Skinner 1984; Giele 1988).⁴

Some authors, such as Parkman, claim that “[h]ousework does not have a neutral meaning; its performance by men and women in households defines and expresses gender relationships” (Parkman 2004, 766) as well as reproduces them. Gender is often used to explain why women tend to perform the usually “feminine tasks” and men the so-called “masculine tasks.” However, since there have been—some rather slow—changes in the division of housework among heterosexual couples, this explanation does not apply to all cases. As Allen and Webster state, “[d]ecreasing role differentiation within marriage allows for a shift in couples’ motivation to stay together. Economic dependence (among wives) and the obligation to provide for (among husbands) are less influential than in the past” (Allen and Webster 2001, 900).

Although most of these findings come from Western literature, the results are not different for the context of Central Europe. Lukács and Frey point to the fact that women in Hungary still spend “2.6 times longer on housework” than men (Lukács and Frey 2003, 69). Similarly, Kotýnková, Kuchařová, and Průša (2003) state that Czech women spend much more time on housework and childcare than their husbands.

Research conducted on the division of housework in gay and lesbian couples shows a higher degree of equality in financial sharing and decision making within lesbian relationships. For example, Lynch and Reilly (1985/86) in their study of 70 lesbian couples found that besides the equality in financial sharing and decision making the household responsibilities tended to be performed individually, but no role-playing was evident. Schneider (1986) compared the relationships of cohabiting lesbian and heterosexual couples and came to the conclusion that lesbian couples divide their household responsibilities more equally than heterosexual couples. The responsibility for each individual household chore was also more likely to be divided evenly by lesbian couples. A comparative study of gay, lesbian and heterosexual couples by Peplau and Cochran (1990)

⁴ As cited in Lindsey (1997, 182).

found that, if there was any specialization in household tasks amongst lesbians, it was usually based on individual skills and interests. Furthermore they emphasised the fact that nowadays “most lesbians and gay men are in ‘dual-worker’ relationships, so that neither partner is the exclusive ‘breadwinner’ and each partner has some measure of economic independence” (Peplau and Cochran 1990, 344). Similarly, Weston (1991) in her book on gay and lesbian kinship pointed to the aspect of financial independence when stating that out of 40 lesbians and 40 gay men she interviewed, only four were financially supported or supporting their partners. For all of them this was only a temporary situation.

Despite the fact that women are often discriminated in the labour market and earn on average one third less than men this does not affect the division of housework as much as it might be the case in heterosexual households. Regardless of the job status of the partner, household tasks in lesbian homes are usually shared fairly evenly (Johnson 1990). This is supported by Dunne (1997) in her study of British lesbian couples, where she makes a connection between a more equal division of household tasks and its influence on career development. Other authors also conclude that homosexual relationships in general are found to have certain advantages such as role flexibility and greater equality (Peplau and Gordon 1982; Solomon, Rothblum, and Balsam 2005; Peplau 1982; Heaphy, Donovan, and Weeks 2002).

Results of most of the research on the division of housework and equality among gay men and lesbians show that homosexual couples are rather resistant to adopting the gender roles that are traditionally present in heterosexual relationships. The division of housework in gay and lesbian households is usually based on individual preferences, and the division into “feminine” and “masculine” tasks performed solely by one partner usually does not occur. Age, occupation, income and other factors were not found to be very influential in this respect. Similarly the majority of lesbian couples I interviewed share housework equally and do not follow the traditional division of tasks into “men’s work” and “women’s work.” Moreover, they also show a high level of financial independence, and either partner’s higher income does not usually lead to an unequal division of housework.

RESULTS

When examining the equality in the division of housework between the partners I focused not only on who does how much and what type of housework, but also on factors that may influence this division such as

the idea of breadwinner and the gender-biased division of tasks into masculine and feminine tasks. In the first part, I concentrate on the financial factor by establishing an abstract connection between the income of the partners and the level of their participation in the household. I base this approach on the traditional division of housework as identified in heterosexual households, where the man, who usually earns more, performs much less housework than the woman.⁵ Further on, I analyze the division based on the task allocation and assess the level to which the couples I interviewed follow the traditional feminine/masculine division of household tasks.

THE ROLE OF THE “BREADWINNER”

Out of the 12 lesbian couples I interviewed, nine reported incomes, where one partner earns significantly more than the other. I referred to these partners as “breadwinners” and I compared their participation in household chores with that of breadwinners in heterosexual couples. According to findings on the division of housework in heterosexual couples the man usually fulfils the role of “breadwinner,” even if the female partner has her own income and is financially independent. This leads women to take on most of the household chores so as to support the primary breadwinner. Money and housework are not unrelated concepts: Blumstein and Schwartz (1983) noted that those who earn more (men) do less housework than those who earn less (women). Financial dependence of women was shown to be one of the reasons why they perform most of the housework (Brines 1994; Walby 1986; Curtis 1986; Delphy and Leonard 1986). Therefore, in spite of the fact that in seven out of nine lesbian couples the partners divided their household expenses equally, I decided to preserve the “breadwinner” category in my analysis.

Concerning the relationship between higher income and the amount of household work done, I divided the couples into four categories: In the first category there are couples whose higher-earner does approximately as much housework as her partner. Couples in which the higher-earner does most of household tasks are in the second category. The situation in which a higher income goes with lower participation in the household is placed into the third category. The fourth category contains couples whose partners reported having similar salaries and no clear “breadwinner.”

⁵ For more detailed analysis see Allen and Webster (2001), Skinner (1984) and Giele (1988).

*MORE MONEY / EQUAL WORK*

The prevailing pattern within the nine unequally earning relationships was that the inequality in earnings did not affect the equality of the division of housework as is often the case in heterosexual relationships. Five couples in this group have an equal division of housework. Kristina (32, SVK) who earns more, and her partner do the shopping together and divide the household tasks equally. She described it in the following way:

There is just one window and we haven't washed it for a year. I think that it came out somehow without words, that one does one thing and the other some other thing. This is especially true for the big cleaning during the weekend. During the week it may be a bit different but I don't think that it would be right if one of us did everything. So I don't think it is like that. And we don't have any conflicts about housework (Kristina, 32, SVK).

Her partner Zora (24, SVK) described the division in even more detail:

Kristina cooks most of the time. I cook spaghetti or scrambled eggs. But I'm always in the kitchen, helping her. And ironing—both of us iron what we need. Kristina puts the clothes into the washing machine. Taking the clothes out, that's usually me. And Kristina usually puts them away. We do the ironing in the morning, before we go to work. We have one window—and I haven't washed it yet. Kristina waters the flowers. I vacuum and dust. We both wash the dishes, and she cleans the bathroom and the floor. And we do the big cleaning once a week together (Zora, 24, SVK).

In this case the breadwinner-role did not affect the participation in domestic work, since both partners were actively involved in the housework⁶.

In the case of Dori (31, HU) and Kamila (30, HU), Kamila earns considerably more than Dori, who works from home, putting her into a potentially disadvantaged position. Being the one who spends more time at home, she could have been expected to do most of the housework, as is the case in heterosexual households (cf. Hochschild 2003). Moreover, this is one of the couples where the lower-earner is almost completely dependent financially on her partner. When asked about finances Dori replied: "We don't divide it, so it is perfectly shared. We spend all the

⁶ A similar situation could be seen in the household of Julia (29, SVK) and Nina (25, SVK) who perceive housework as a necessity to be done by both of them equally. They do not make any strict division of the tasks and it is mostly based on who has more time. In the case of Lara (23, CZ) and Natalie (21, CZ) it was harder to identify the division of housework since they share their flat with three other people. However, based on their responses they divide the responsibilities equally, although Lara earns more than Natalie.



money together.” Kamila, despite the fact that she earns much more and is the “breadwinner” of the household, does a lot of housework as well.

So even when she works so much, and even when she earns more and works seven hours a day, she does a lot of housework which probably wouldn’t be the case if she were a man. And I don’t have to do everything—and I never thought that it takes so much time. So she basically works as much as a man, because they usually have more jobs [in our country] and then still washes and cooks (Dori, 31, HU).

This couple divided the house work rather equally, despite the fact that one woman is the breadwinner and the other one spends most of her time at home.⁷

MORE MONEY / MORE WORK

In two other couples, the division of housework was the opposite of the traditional gender division if we perceive the “breadwinner” as the less participating one. In these cases the partner who earned more was at the same time performing a larger amount of the housework. However, none of them perceived this division as unequal. The concept of the “breadwinner” in these cases was only abstract, since both couples divided their household expenses and equally paid for the rent, food and other things needed in the household.

Melissa (31, SVK) who is the higher-earner explained why she is the one who does more work, starting with describing the cooking arrangements:

I cook. I cook, I cook, but I cook only in this relationship. When I want or when I want to make her happy, or when I think about it, that she needs it. . . . She doesn’t cook, because she doesn’t know how to cook and she just helps me around. And I don’t even want her to, because I cook very well and it somehow just naturally went like this, that I started with it—and I do everything the best—that’s what I suffer from still, so even if she cuts the onion the other way, I am able to do it again my way (Melissa, 31, SVK).

Melissa stressed that she often believes that she can do the things better and therefore doesn’t leave much space for her partner. Her girlfriend

⁷ In the case of Monika (30, SVK) and Sylvia (21, SVK), Monika who represents the traditional “breadwinner,” since she covers most of the household expenses, does most of the cooking and also performs most of the housework. However, it is somehow balanced by the fact that, as she stated: “Sylvia spends more time with my son. I work a lot, so she plays with him, picks him up from school and so on.” And since taking care of children is also one of the much gendered tasks within relationships, the fact that one of them spends more time with the child is in my opinion also a significant element to be taken into consideration when evaluating the division of housework.



Linda (23, SVK) still performs some of the household tasks though. In this case it seems that the personality of Melissa contributes to the fact that higher earning does not lead to lower participation in the household, since she enjoys taking care of her partner.

In the case of the second couple, Izabela (21, CZ) who is the higher-earner seems to be performing even more household tasks than her partner. However, as in the case of the previous couple, she perceived the division of their household tasks as equal:

[We cook] as it is needed. I eat a lot, so we cook for me. But otherwise who has time and who feels like it.

Q.: And who does the cleaning?

As it is needed—I think the one who has time does it. Like we know who is good at what so we do that (Izabela, 21, CZ).

These examples support the idea that in lesbian relationships the partner who earns more and provides the majority of the household's income still often performs an equal share of household tasks, or even a larger amount of housework.

MORE MONEY / LESS WORK

Only in two of the nine couples was the person representing the “breadwinner” doing less housework. Emma (35, SVK) and Tanya (26, SVK) divide their household expenses equally although Emma has a higher income. Emma's participation in the household is less than that of her partner. This may be explained by the fact that she works and at the same time studies at university. Compared to her partner she has less time. She cooks less, but as she said it is more about the adjustment to their life situation:

It depends on time. When Tanya went to school I used to cook and even bake. Now I don't bake at all. . . . Now when I go to school and it is mostly on her. And I have to say that now I got used to the fact that she is taking care of most of the things. I somehow leave them to her and I am better off (laughter)—but still, I cook sometimes. Even like two to three times a week. And I like to make something for her as an expression of my gratitude that she is helping me so much (Emma, 35, SVK).

She admits that Tanya not only does most of the cooking but also the rest of the housework: “I usually wash and Tanya irons. But it is very simple, since the machine does the work. Some of the clothes we wash by hand. It is also about time. Cleaning and vacuuming are mostly done by



Tanya.” Tanya seemed to have adjusted to the situation since as she said: “When we have time, we do it together since it is faster. And when Emma has to study I do it myself.” In this couple the partners have adjusted to the situation in which one of them has considerably less time due to combining work and study. It is not a fixed pattern, since both partners mentioned that the division was different before. When Tanya was studying Emma was doing more of the housework. In this case the unequal division of housework is not a result of more power of the person with higher income; rather it is the result of an adjustment to a specific life situation, especially if we take into consideration that the division of household expenses is equal and that the pattern of doing the housework has changed throughout their relationship.⁸

EQUAL MONEY

The remaining three couples reported having very similar salaries. In all three cases they divide their household expenses either by both paying half of each bill, or one of them paying the rent and the other putting aside the same amount of money for food and other things needed for the household. Of these three couples two share the household tasks equally without having any strict division. They perceive doing the housework as a necessity and do not base the division on individual preferences. In the third couple the division is rather unequal, since Sonia (41, SVK) does most of the housework except cooking. They agreed that Klara (29, SVK) would cook more often. The rest of the household tasks are done by Sonia who took over the typical women’s role in the household. She described her participation in the household as follows: “As to the rest of the housework, I do everything else including washing windows and so on. But I don’t mind it. Usually one of us cooks and the other washes dishes. So I wash them more often.” Klara does very little of the housework, but as she stated: “On the other hand, I do mainly the man’s work, like putting furniture together and so on.” This division is not influenced by income, since they have similar salaries and share the money together. Rather as Sonia expressed it: “I think it is mainly about my personality, the way I function in relationships.”

From the analysis of these interviews it seems that money did not play a significant role creating a strict distinction between the breadwinner

⁸ The household of Gabi (32, HU) and Diana (32, HU) has a similar pattern of adjusting to the needs of one of the partners. This results in the situation where Diana who earns more than Gabi performs less housework. However, there is no strict division within this couple that would make one of the partners the sole provider and the other the sole caretaker within the household.



and caretaker among the respondents. The prevailing pattern of housework division indicated equality among the partners regardless of their income status. One of the possible explanations for this is the fact that these women did not expect the other one to support them financially, and if they did, then only for a short time. Therefore financial independence may be one of the factors that can lead to greater equality in lesbian couples.

WHO DOES WHAT AND WHY?

The majority of couples did not divide their tasks based on gender categories. When describing the tasks they perform, only one woman said that she is doing “men’s work.” The rest of the women described the “men’s work” as practical tasks. They did not perceive it as anything special that they were able to do this kind of work in the household. In seven out of twelve couples, both partners stated that they are able to do most of the “masculine” tasks. However, despite this fact, the “masculine” tasks were not as equally divided as the “feminine” ones, since only in one case both partners were doing this type of work. Lara (23, CZ) and Natalie (21, CZ) share all household tasks equally, including the “masculine” tasks.

Well, I would say that maybe I [do most of the men’s work], but now I think that Natalie [does it] as well. I think we grew up similarly, that if you don’t mend it, it will stay broken. I’m the kind who likes to do those things. And I think it is similar for Natalie.

Q.: And who calls the workers, if they are needed?

I leave that to Natalie [laughter], I don’t like doing things like that (Lara, 23, CZ).

Her partner, Natalie also mentioned that when deciding on who will do the work, time and certain skills also play an important role: “Who is at home, who has time and who knows how to do it, does it. It depends on what it is of course.”

In the remaining six couples, even though both partners claim to be able to do masculine type of housework, one of them performs most of it. The reason for this division is usually in the enjoyment of these tasks. As Julia (29, SVK) stated: “What is only my domain and I wouldn’t let anyone do it, are the technical things, because I enjoy them very much—but it is not about the way that I am dominant and therefore I do it, but because I really enjoy it.” Although Julia insists on performing most of the technical work in the household she is also participating equally in other household tasks that would be perceived as feminine. Overall, in cases where both partners are able to do technical work, usually one of the partners does it as a result of a mutual agreement.



Nevertheless, there were also five couples, in which only one partner was able to do the repair work. Generally among these couples, the person who takes care of mending is also much involved in other more feminine housework. For example, Izabela (21, CZ), who does most of the manual work participates equally, sometimes even a bit more in the rest of the housework, doing the traditionally feminine tasks such as cooking, cleaning, washing, ironing etc. Similarly, Monika (30, SVK), although being able to do only small repair jobs, combines both spheres since she does most of the cooking in their household as well as other feminine tasks.

The division of housework according to feminine and masculine categories was most visible in the household of Sonia (41, SVK) and Klara (29, SVK).⁹ The division among these two women resembles the usual division of feminine and masculine tasks. Sonia is responsible for “90%” of the housework except cooking which is done by Klara “on the basis of an agreement.” Nevertheless, it was Klara who used the term “doing the men’s work.” Similarly, Sonia described herself as “act[ing] more like a woman.” She explained this position by referring to her up-bringing and the influence of her mother. In this case one of the possible explanations for their unequal division of housework may be the difference in their “gender ideologies” (Hochschild 2003),¹⁰ since it can be deduced from the interview that Sonia has a more traditional perception of women’s roles than Klara.

CONCLUSION

The analysis of the division of housework among the twelve lesbian couples I interviewed shows a high level of equality in the division of housework regardless of their income. The difference in earnings usually does not lead to a situation in which the higher-earner would not participate equally in the housework. Furthermore, the findings indicate that these couples in most cases do not follow the gender-based division of tasks into masculine and feminine but combine both equally. They divide the housework according to preferences (who likes what), abilities (who

⁹ The resemblance with a traditional division of housework appeared also in the couple of Diana (32, HU) and Gabi (32, HU), where Diana does less of the feminine tasks in the household while doing all the repairing. Nevertheless, she still participates in other household tasks such as cleaning the bathroom, and does most of the cooking and ironing.

¹⁰ As Hochschild states: “A woman’s gender ideology determines what sphere she wants to identify with (home or work) and how much power she wants to have (less, more, or the same amount)” (Hochschild 2003, 15).

can do what) or time (who has the time). Thus it can be concluded, that although there are differences among these couples as to the level of equality in the division of housework, over all they are rather equal while not following the usual division of household tasks as it is often present in heterosexual relationships.

It is important to stress here, that the results of my research should not be generally applied to all lesbian couples in the region. The fact that these couples show a high level of equality in the division of housework is not to suggest that lesbian couples are equal in all spheres. I acknowledge the fact that lesbian couples experience many problems in their relationships similar to the problems of any other couples (such as alcoholism, domestic violence, etc.). However, one of the main aims of this article was to demonstrate that an equal division of housework is possible. As my analysis has proved, the high level of equality in lesbian relationships is neither significantly influenced by income nor by gender-based division of tasks in the household.

Yet, the question remains, why do lesbian couples show a higher level of equality in the division of housework than heterosexual ones. While research on heterosexual couples points to a close connection between income of partners and their participation in housework, it would be insightful to investigate what factors contribute to the equal division of household tasks in lesbian couples. According to Risman and Schwartz “it may be that after the conventions of gender are removed, power inequities are so unflattering to both that partners are intensely motivated to avoid the costs of greater power and powerlessness alike” (1988, 135). Among the factors influencing the level of equality, my respondents pointed to the influence of parents, who shared their housework equally and thus provided an example to their children, or to their up-bringing as independent and self-sufficient individuals.

All these different aspects provide more topics for further research on the division of housework in lesbian relationships. I believe that more research is needed on this topic, especially in the region of Central Europe.

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