

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Mainstream economic models of the household (see Becker, 1981) view the division of paid work and housework problem as one of comparative advantage. The spouse with the comparative advantage in housework performs all housework, and the spouse with the comparative advantage in paid work specializes in paid work. With complete specialization, the latter becomes the sole breadwinner of the household. However, the trend of dual-income families suggests the need for alternative models, or at least the inclusion of parameters that could explain this trend.

The division of housework problem is not a research area confined to the field of home economics. Indeed, sociologists and feminists have displayed keen interest in this subject. Parsons (1949) raises the notion that a traditional division of labour contributes to marital stability. Poortman and Kalmijn (1998) however, point at modern sociologists' views that a more equal division of labour in the household produces non-economic advantages such as marital satisfaction, thus lowering the risk of divorce. In their study of the effects of women's work on the risk of divorce, they show, among other factors, that depending on task-type, a husband's contribution to housework has either no effect on divorce or that greater contribution of the husband reduces the probability of divorce, particularly for male-oriented tasks such as odd jobs.

They also show that this effect is symmetric: when men do more than women, their marriage is also unstable, suggesting that the fairness interpretation to the division of labour – marriage stability relationship is correct. Interestingly, they extend their study to show that an equal division of child-rearing tasks is more important for marital stability than an equal division of housework (the effect is three times as large, and symmetric).

Feminists have also been drawn to this research area, acknowledging Becker's (1965) contribution to the formalization of women's roles at home and to nineteenth century economists' inclusion of the home, housework, reproduction and child-rearing as economic activity. They however argue that traditional home economists failed to emphasize the effect of direct discrimination and occupational segregation on wage relativities (Cohen, 1982:155), and thus on the resulting apparent comparative advantage that women have on housework (and that men have on paid work), one of the cornerstones of Becker's (1981) division of work theory. They view as "bad science" such a seemingly unrealistic method of including women and their activities in economics (Hewitson, 2001).

Recent literature on fairness has also emerged, with experiments suggesting that fairness considerations are important in bargaining and multiple-agent activity. More specifically, a preference for fairness among at least some agents appears to significantly affect the choice of optimal contracts.

When a bargaining element is incorporated into economic models of the household, the division of labour problem is viewed somewhat differently. An inclusion of a preference for fairness in particular, spurred by the fairness literature mentioned above, shows that while wage differentials among spouses may affect the division of housework (as Becker predicts), a preference for fairness encourages a more **equal** division of housework.

To what degree does the economic literature on the division of labour in households reflect the thoughts captured in research into the same in the fields of sociology and women's studies? This paper is an attempt to draw on the literature of household economics, sociology, feminist studies and the new fairness literature to arrive at a more comprehensive view of the division of labour problem.

In Chapter Two, the theoretical foundations of economic models of the family are examined, along with some discussion of the usefulness of the various models reviewed.

Chapter Three explores traditional economic models of the family that address the division of labour problem.

Chapter Four draws on literature in the fields of Sociology, Women's Studies and Fairness Economics to critique the models highlighted in Chapters Two and Three.

This leads to Chapter Five, in which a preference for fairness parameter is incorporated into marriage models. The validity of such models is then reviewed vis-à-vis Sociologist and Feminist Theory. Chapter Six concludes.