

## **4.0 SOCIOLOGIST & FEMINIST CRITIQUES OF ECONOMIC MODELS OF FAMILY**

The subject of the family and matters pertaining to the family are issues that also draw the interest of sociologists and feminists. The division of labour problem in particular has been the subject of close scrutiny by sociologists, for its expected impact on marital stability and the family unit, and by feminists, for its effect on the welfare of women. Both disciplines appear to take issue with the neoclassical economist's depiction of how families decide on the division of labour within the household. Feminists question the fundamental assumptions, methodologies and conclusions of neoclassical models of the family while sociologists point to a myriad of psychological and emotional factors that are absent from economic analyses of household allocation decisions. This chapter attempts to highlight some of the key arguments made by sociologists and feminists, which provide interesting insights and suggestions as to how the division of labour model can be improved.

### **4.1 Questioning the Fundamentals of Economic Models of Family**

*"To say that the 'new home economists' are not feminist in their orientation would be as much of an understatement as to say that Bengal tigers are not vegetarians"*

(Bergmann, 1987:132-3)

The incorporation of women and their activities as subjects of economic study has been lauded as a step forward for women. Ferber and Nelson (1993:6) for example, applaud the formal introduction of domestic work as a third alternative to the traditional labour versus leisure analysis in models of individual choice. They join other feminists however, in contending that by including women as subjects in economic models but not altering the tools of analysis, very distinct male biases have been created. They describe this as an “add women and stir” approach.

Hewitson (2001), in explaining feminist empiricist viewpoints, puts forth the claim made in equity studies that the field of economics is male-dominated, thus generating male biases in the discipline’s content. She describes the unrealistic and inappropriate incorporation of women and their activities in theoretical work as “bad science” that has resulted in misguided and incomplete research questions and hypotheses relating to women, and consequently, biased conclusions. Gustaffson (1990:6) maintains that “it is not the (neoclassical economic) theory that is patriarchic, but the questions male economists have asked and the conclusions they have drawn and particularly the policy implications based on the research”.

Elson (1991) similarly accuses orthodox economists of being gender-blind as opposed to gender-neutral. She attributes the unfair burden of work on women

and policies damaging to women to economists' failure to fully acknowledge the value of women's work.

From these broad criticisms of male bias in the theoretical relationships of orthodox economic models, we turn to more specific criticisms of the individual assumptions employed in economic models of the family. The assumptions-based criticisms presented in this paper fall into several broad categories: circular reasoning, the non-transferable nature of skills, treatment of women's choice as voluntary and the assumption of the autonomous and selfish agent.

#### **4.1.1 Circular Reasoning of Assumptions**

Neoclassical models of the family argue that even without considering biological differences between men and women, women would have comparative advantage in home production as long as gendered wage differentials exist. Women should therefore specialize in home production and forgo investments in market capital. In short, women's low labour market earnings are used as an argument for women to under-invest in market capital. However, economists explain these low labour market earnings using women's household responsibilities and the claim that women simply under-invest in market-type human capital. That such arguments involve circular reasoning is ignored. Worse, this circular reasoning serves only to justify and reinforce the sexist

status quo, ignoring the impact of discrimination in the labour market on women's choices.

#### 4.1.2 The Non-Transferable Nature of Skills

Becker has also been accused of assuming that skills developed within the household are not transferable to the market. Hewitson (2001) claims that this assumption serves to exaggerate differences in productivity, however insignificant, which then translates into comparative advantage differentials which are deemed irreversible. The argued gain from specialization would therefore be inflated.

This criticism however, appears misguided, since Becker allowed for the possibility that a particular type of human capital may improve efficiency in more than one type of activity. He specifies the orientation of a particular type of human capital using monetary terms: if a dollar spent on  $H^1$  type capital raises wage rates more than a dollar spent on  $H^2$  type capital, then  $H^1$  type capital would be more specific to market than  $H^2$  type capital. Similarly, if a dollar spent on  $H^2$  type capital improves efficiency at performing household tasks more than a dollar spent on  $H^1$  type capital, then  $H^2$  type capital would be more specific to the household than  $H^1$  type capital (Becker, 1993:36). In other words, household-type human capital may also improve efficiency in market-type work, but to a lesser extent than market-type capital. It is obvious then that Becker's

model does not in fact assume that skills developed for household work cannot be transferred to the market.

#### 4.1.3 Women's Choice: Voluntary?

*"Fasting is not the same thing as being forced to starve. Having the option of eating makes fasting what it is: choosing not to eat when one could have eaten."*

Amartya Sen (1999)

Neoclassical models tend to use gendered wage differentials to explain the "voluntary" choices of women to under-invest in market capital. Blau and Ferber (1992:140) however, argue that discrimination and social influences steer women toward decisions that jeopardize their status in labour markets, and it is these same forces that generate both wage relativities **and** the division of labour. By hiding discrimination and societal influences behind "rational choice", economists have failed to acknowledge the actual variables that **constrain** a woman's labour market choices. In fact, these same variables suggest that maintaining a gendered division of labour serves the interest of men.

Consistent with this line of thought is Bergmann's (1995) suggestion that women are crowded into certain occupations and denied other occupations by men, creating an artificially large supply of labour and consequently low wages in the occupations into which they are crowded. She further argues that attitudes

regarding what jobs are “proper” for women are **learned** attitudes that perpetuate male dominance.

Yet another point of contention regarding neoclassical economists’ view of women’s choice is the argument that labour supply studies so far have failed to fully capture the internal dynamics of the household as an institution (Hariss, 1993), ignoring the need for interaction between households and labour market institutions (Mies, 1986 and Newell, 1993). In the face of evolving household structures, the public realm (labour markets) has in theoretical work remained separate from the private sphere (households). Orthodox economic models continue to see household decisions as affected by labour markets while failing to acknowledge the role household decisions play in affecting the structure of labour markets.

An alternative to this dichotomy of productive work versus reproductive work is Purdy’s (1988) suggestion that all production is aimed at social reproduction. As such, emphasis should be given not to output and income growth but to the achievement and expansion of people’s potential. A related theme then would be to view work as toil to be avoided or reduced where possible.

One illustration of how the productive work versus reproductive work dichotomy could result in hidden social ills is the emergence of the dual burden of women.

Society's norms of seeing the male as primary breadwinner and the female as primary caregiver has created the norm of viewing female employment as a way to **supplement** family income. When women participate in labour markets, they are also expected to bear responsibility for domestic work before and/or after market work hours. Gershuny (1987) describes this pattern as the dual burden of working women.

In farming communities, women bear a third burden of performing unpaid work in fields. Whatmore (1990) and Delphy and Leonard (1992) find such patterns evident among farming women in Western countries.

Thus, inasmuch as development creates employment opportunities for women, it also serves to intensify toil, adding to the work and responsibilities of women at the expense of their well-being and in some cases, their health. In fact, Afshar (1993:261) notes that "the economic crisis in much of the underdeveloped world is being regarded in terms of ever more intense use of women's time and labour."

Szalai (1975) also alludes to this dual burden of women problem, noting that in the face of financial pressures, dual-income households have become a necessity, creating the double burden problem. When one measures total work hours as the sum of hours spent on paid work and hours spent on domestic

work, then women work longer hours than men. Interestingly, Szalai also finds that labour-saving devices have had little effect on total hours worked.

Neoclassical economists have also pointed to biological makeup in women's decision-making, suggesting that women choose to work at home or in low-wage jobs as a result of rational deductions based on biological factors. Cohen (1982:153) accuses this biological reductionist view of ignoring the possibility that women are **socialized** into specific roles in the economy, and consequently models based on biological reductionist assumptions hide the benefits to men of a gendered division of labour. In fact, feminist economists such as Ferber and Birnbaum (1977) and McCrate (1988) suggest that specializations are social, as opposed to natural. Sen (1990) goes a step further, suggesting that women in general have been socialized to expect little. By focusing on natural factors, the economist fails to recognize the economic agency of social gender which constrains women's choices. What the economist takes to be rational and voluntary choices on the part of women may be simply social agency at work. In male-dominated societies, women's choices regarding participation in the labour market may not be wholly voluntary.

#### **4.1.4 The Autonomous and Selfish Agent**

England (1993) argues that the neoclassical assumption of the autonomous and selfish agent is derived from a "separative model of human nature" which



presumes that humans are immune to social influences and lack the emotional connection required to facilitate empathy. She deems this androcentric in that the assumption is biased to serve the interests of men since any analysis based on the "given-ness" of the separative self both hides and perpetuates the disadvantages of work arrangements to women.

England also notes that the pareto optimality criterion for efficiency is one offshoot of this separative self assumption. If agents are autonomous and selfish, and interpersonal utility comparisons cannot be made, then one cannot assume the empathic, emotionally connected self, and comparisons between groups (requiring the averaging of utilities across persons) becomes impossible. In so doing, we are unable to study if certain groups at the bottom of hierarchies average less utility than others. In short, we cannot assess the equality of utility (which could advocate egalitarian redistribution) and we therefore must fall back to viewing optimal distribution in theoretical relationships through the lens of pareto-optimal efficiency. Strober (1987) seems in agreement with this criticism, challenging the fundamental neoclassical assumption that efficiency is good because it creates the greatest welfare.

Feminist criticism of the separative self assumption seems consistent with views of sociologists who see interdependence and empathy as more important determinants of the stability of marital relations than efficiency (see for example,

Nock 1995). In fact, Hansen (1991) posits that marital satisfaction would be lower for couples who view marriage in strictly exchange terms.

Including elements of fairness and reciprocity may serve to bring the separative agent in economic models closer to the empathic, socially-connected self suggested by England. However even then, as we shall see later, sociologists believe that how fairness is specified will have an impact on the stability of social relations.

If we recognize that men and women's decisions can be influenced by norms and social trends, and that agents may be more empathic and emotionally-connected than depicted in orthodox economic models, then notions of what is fair may colour the perceptions and therefore influence the decisions of husbands and wives. The next section draws on fairness literature to highlight the role that fairness plays in decision-making, and on sociologist literature to examine what fairness means to individuals in different types of social relations.

## **4.2 Fairness and Reciprocity in the Decisions of Families**

As we have seen earlier, the assumption of the selfish and rational agent may not be truly representative of everyday people. Where feminists have criticized this assumption based on observations of real-life behavior, a newer breed of economists have studied the applicability of the rationally selfish agent in a more

theoretical manner, drawing on game theory and experiments to test the significance of fairness notions in decision-making. Economic literature on fairness has presented interesting insights into how fairness is incorporated into decision-making and social interaction.

#### 4.2.1 Fairness in the Decision-Making Mechanism

Sigmund, Fehr and Nowak (2002) examine the significance of fairness notions in decision-making using Güth's (1980) Ultimatum Game, in which two players participate in two-stage, non-repeated interaction to divide a sum of money given to them. The first player is the proposer, who in Stage 1 of the game offers part of this money to the second player. In Stage 2, the second player can either accept the proposal (in which case the money is split according to the ratio proposed by the first player), or reject the proposal (in which case the game ends, with neither player getting any payoff).

If agents are Homo Economicus (rational and motivated by self-interest), then all first players would make the lowest possible offer, and all second players would accept **any** offer, no matter how small. However, an experiment involving a sum of \$100 resulted in two thirds of all offers falling in the range of \$40 - \$50, and more than half of all \$20 proposals were rejected.

That small offers were rejected and large offers proposed suggests that people may in fact be a cross between Homo Economicus and Homo Emoticus, ruled as much by emotion as by logic and selfishness.

When the experiment was repeated using different sums of money, results were robust and independent of sex, age, schooling and surprisingly, the amount of money involved. An experiment in Indonesia for example, showed people rejecting small offers despite the fact that the sum of money involved was slightly less than three times the average monthly income of subjects.

Many cultural variations of the experiment revealed consistent outcomes, suggesting that rather than being purely selfish and rational, people the world over place a high value on fair outcomes.

Sigmund, Fehr and Nowak do however, highlight that the constraints of the game (no haggling, subjects are not known to each other, the game is not repeated and the prize disappears in the event of non-agreement) are artificial. Nevertheless, they maintain that the game allows study of human behaviour in a well-defined situation and uncovers fundamental principles that govern decision-making.

The experiments highlighted above suggest that the concept of fairness is universally-accepted. The next question then would be whether fairness is

**universally-defined.** Sociologists believe that what is perceived as fair very much depends on the social framework governing a particular relationship.

#### **4.2.2 Fairness and Reciprocity in Different Types of Social Relations**

Fiske (1991, 1992) distinguishes between four basic forms of reciprocity: hierarchical social relations, communal-sharing social relations, equality-matching social relations and market-pricing social relations.

In hierarchical social relations, exchange is reciprocated in an implicit manner, with superiors receiving more from inferiors than vice versa, and superiors bearing responsibility to provide for and see to the needs of inferiors. This is typical in very traditional families where relations are ranked by gender and birth order. Fairness notions would be based on the norms of rank that characterize this type of relationship. Women who voluntarily forgo economic and decision-making power, believing that their breadwinner husbands will provide for them and see to their needs and that of their families would fall in this category. Evolving social and economic structures have however, resulted in changes in norms such that families falling in this category are now few and far between.

Communal-sharing social relations on the other hand, emphasize group belonging: the welfare of the group as a whole takes precedence over the welfare of the individual. In this type of framework, what is given and taken is not

based on notions of explicit balancing, and actions are not thought of in terms of bargaining. This most closely resembles the concept of the "gift economy" where love and emotional ties colour the attitudes, behaviour and actions of individuals. It is the strength of emotional ties that defines social relations of this type.

Cheal (1988) notes that in this type of social relation, creating and maintaining the social framework is the primary aim of the group. Fairness to the individual takes a backseat to the good of the group as a whole.

In equality-matching social relations, actions and attitudes are grounded in egalitarian motives, and a more basic notion of fairness and reciprocity shapes behaviour. A household built on such a framework is likely to value a fair (in terms of equal) division of domestic work.

Market-pricing social relations are more calculative. Exchanges are based on considerations of costs and benefits, and goods and services whether paid or unpaid (even care and sex!) is exchanged for something that is considered a "fair deal". This implies conscious utility-maximizing decisions and the type of rationality exemplified in orthodox economic models of the family.

Clark and Chrisman (1995) suggest that where most relations are characterized by notions of equality, a running theme in the equality-matching and market-

pricing social frameworks, close and intimate relationships such as that of couples and families are shaped more by needs-oriented principles of justice, in which notions of mutuality and caring take precedence.

Would a partnership based on communal-sharing then not value equality and fairness? Clark and Chrisman explain that as long as all members share the same moral stand, the act of emphasizing benefits to the group as a whole may create the perception of an equal partnership. Equality and fairness would be perceived as equality of needs-fulfillment.

It should be noted that the communal-sharing social relations model in sociology may seem to echo common-preference models in economics. However, the difference appears to lie in the notions underlying the common-goal characteristic of the models: while common preference models are typified by notions of consensus or the decision-making power of household heads, the communal-sharing model is defined by emotional ties.

Against this theoretical backdrop of how fairness is defined in different types of social relations, we turn to the more specific notion of fairness in marital relations.

### 4.2.3 Fairness in Marital Relations

Social exchange theory defines marriage as a long-term exchange relationship involving implicit and explicit bargaining, especially over matters of allocation. Where bargaining is successful, positive emotions are created, resulting in greater joint investment in the union and greater incentives to remain married (Brines and Joyner, 1999 and Lawler and Yoon, 1993). However, unlike the orthodox economic definition of successful bargaining as reaching agreement, sociologists define successful bargaining as that which produces an outcome which is most closely in line with spouses' ideals. When couples bargain over the division of labour for example, each spouse would conduct subjective evaluations ex post to determine if the decision was beneficial to each person.

Adams (1965) explains that evaluation of a dyadic bargaining situation is based on the comparison of the ratio of wife's outcomes to inputs against her husband's ratio of the same. This evaluation impacts marital stability in that any imbalance between perceptions of a partner's net outcomes creates psychological distress and in response, individuals can "leave the field" to relieve such distress. Jasso (1988) echoes this line of thought, explaining that perceptions of unfairness in marriage, especially if ongoing or recurrent, are predictors of marital stability.

How do couples evaluate if outcomes are fair? Thibault and Kelley (1961) define two types of standards of comparison: the comparison level, where one



determines satisfaction with the relationship in terms of costs and benefits and what one thinks one deserves, and the comparison level for alternatives, where one evaluates the lowest level of outcomes acceptable given other relationship alternatives. When the comparison level is lower than the comparison of alternative situations, partners are likely to leave the relationship. This is equivalent to the comparison of utility within marriage against utility outside the marriage in economic theory.

How does fairness enter this comparison? Lennon and Rosenfield (1994) explain that if a person thinks life may be better without his or her spouse, that person would be more likely to be critical of his or her current situation, more readily defining it as unfair.

Notions of alternatives and power in social exchange theory also play a role in the determination of what is fair and what is unfair. Having more alternatives to a relationship bestows one with more power. Such a person is more likely to set high expectations in the relationship. In contrast, one with fewer alternatives (and therefore more to lose should the marriage end) would be more likely to have lower expectations of one's spouse and is therefore more likely to view a particular situation as fair and satisfactory.

Equity theory, while suggesting an association between feelings of inequity and divorce also proposes that not all unfair outcomes result immediately in divorce. In equity theory, feelings of inequity trigger distress, which motivates people to resolve such distress by psychological justification, by seeking to change the situation, or by leaving the situation. Distress from inequity is thus not always followed by flight. A wife trapped in a relationship with unfair work arrangements for example, may justify it as fair, or she may resort to actions that in her mind reduce the inequity or she may leave the marriage. The outcomes suggested in equity theory is not unlike the problem of appropriate threat points in economic bargaining literature, where the threat point in some situations may be divorce and in other situations, a non-cooperative marriage.

Sociologists also believe that perceptions of fairness are very much dependent on gender ideology. Greenstein (1996) explains that a person's ideals of the roles of men and women can result in different levels of tolerance for behaviour, and subsequently different evaluations of what is fair and what isn't. Heaton and Blake (1999) similarly find that gender ideology shapes perceptions of fairness, and it is these perceptions that determine whether specialization stabilizes or destabilizes marital relations.

Jasso (1988) links gender ideology to reference points, positing that a more traditional couple, subscribing to notions of complementarity in marriage, would

compare self to ideals of what is just to themselves as man and as woman. Such a couple is less likely to make a priori comparisons of personal payoffs from a division of labour arrangement against the payoff to their partners. Egalitarian couples on the other hand, are more likely to use their partners as comparison reference points, comparing self to partner (essentially engaging in interpersonal justice comparisons). Thus, traditional gender ideology can serve to make an unequal division of labour **seem** fair.

Game and<sup>4</sup> Pringle (1983) similarly report on the emotionalisation of domestic work in traditional gender ideology. Domestic work may be positioned as an expression of love for family. If so, even women who dislike housework and childcare may be satisfied with taking responsibility for these tasks if they see such work as essential work for the people they love.

Weiss (1987) finds that in a traditional society, women's employment is seen by some as an outlet for personal needs as opposed to an income source. Where domestic work is emotionalized, the market work versus domestic work choice of women would involve pitting personal needs-fulfillment against family needs-fulfillment. Wives would then find it difficult to question an unequal division of labour arrangement, let alone deem it unfair.

It appears then that sociologists and feminists are for the most part in agreement in their questioning the orthodox economist's attributing household allocation to rational optimization. Both suggest that household decisions are affected more by tradition, ideology, social norms and structures and power. The next section presents sociologist interpretations of gendered division of labour trends.

### **4.3 Sociologist Interpretations of Division of Labour Trends**

Where orthodox economists explain gendered division of labour trends from the viewpoint of efficiency, sociologists point to the role of ideology, fairness and norms in division of labour patterns.

#### **4.3.1 When Specialization Adds to Marital Stability**

Early sociologist literature posits that sex role specialization is necessary for marital stability. Parsons (1949) explains that family roles must be differentiated, with adult family members taking on roles and personalities that will promote emotional growth and proper socialization which in turn aids children in breaking free from dependence on the family. Parsons explains that without specialization or a stable task leader, there can be no expressive and supportive home environment necessary for the growth of individual members.

More recent work uses the concept of power to explain how specialization may add to marital stability. McNey (1992) suggests that a mother who gives up full

time work for her family may not be relinquishing actual power. While she loses financial power and autonomy in giving up her job, she gains emotional influence and control in the family. Thus, a conscious decision to accept this tradeoff need not necessarily translate into loss of power and influence per se. This appears to be in tandem with Becker's theory that women may be willing to expend time and energy to childrearing since doing so increases the returns to their biological investments in production (Becker, 1993: 37-38).

Poortman and Kalmijn (2001) cite empirical evidence by Cherlin (1979) and others that show divorce risk as higher in marriages where the wife works and where her working hours are long. They also point to studies by D'Amico (1983) and Peters (1993) that suggest that potential financial situations post divorce also influences divorce risk. Women with greater market capital and who remain employed during marriage are better able to improve their financial situation and therefore face higher divorce risk.

They put forth as economic arguments for the division of labour the independence argument and the specialization argument. In the first, women who are financially independent would find it easier to end an unhappy marriage, and husbands would likewise find it less difficult to leave wives who are financially able to support themselves. In the second argument, specialization

increases efficiency in households, generating gains to remain married. In both arguments, female labour force participation results in higher divorce risk.

They note that while previous studies do seem to support the above two arguments, the support for the independence argument is less evident under closer scrutiny. If female employment creates marital-destabilizing financial independence, then so too would higher income and career opportunities for women. However, when income, education and work experience are included as parameters, the evidence is less clear-cut.

Poortman and Kalmijn also present sociologist interpretations of how specialization may stabilize marital relations, explaining that the decision to divorce is more likely motivated by socio-psychological reasons and cultural attitudes and norms. Work offers opportunities for self-realization and social recognition, making women less socially, psychologically and emotionally dependent on their spouses and their marriages, and possibly less unwilling to establish an independent household post-divorce.

Also, if women's employment runs against societal norms, then female labour force participation is likely to create tensions within the marriage, reducing marital satisfaction and increasing divorce risk.

The results of the empirical studies cited earlier may therefore be explained by these theories rather than the financial independence and specialization theories. In fact, Bracher et. al (1993) and Beck and Hartmann (1999) find that the destabilizing effect of women's full-time work has decreased over time in Australia and Germany, in tandem with adjustments in societal norms regarding women's employment. However, South's (2001) study of American marriages finds that the effect of women's employment on divorce risk has increased over time.

Poortman and Kalmijn warn however, that it is possible that the direction of causation runs in the opposite direction as well: as noted earlier, women anticipating divorce may increase market intensity as a hedge against divorce. This may explain the conflicting results of Bracher et. al, Beck and Hartman and South.

So far, any positive effects of women's employment on divorce risk have very different interpretations: where economists focus on financial and economic aspects, sociologists focus on cultural norms and the psychological and emotional independence that follows employment.

Poortman and Kalmijn proceed to test the relationship between female labour force participation and divorce risk in the Netherlands in an effort to better study

the elements raised here. Firstly, they posit that if the financial considerations of the economic arguments take precedence over the psycho-emotional and cultural ones of sociologist arguments, then the specialization should be symmetric. All else being equal, if specialization stabilizes marital relations via the economic gains effect, then one would expect divorce risk to reduce when couples specialize, regardless of whether it is the husband or the wife who takes up market employment. If however, the positive effect specialization has on marital stability is due more to cultural norms and psycho-emotional factors, then only a husband-as-main-provider pattern of specialization would be stabilizing; an arrangement where the wife is the main provider would create marital tensions that destabilize the marriage.

Furthermore, a change in cultural norms from a traditional framework to a more egalitarian one would serve to erode the specialization-marital-stability relationship. In more egalitarian societies, a fair division of domestic and paid work would generate marital satisfaction which reduces divorce risk.

They find that when husbands contribute more to domestic work (thereby reducing specialization), divorce risk falls. When domestic work is defined as childcare rather than housework, the effect is stronger (almost three times as large) and symmetric. They also note that divorce risk falls with husbands' contribution to housework and childcare, and then increases after the point of



equal division. The results of their study then appear to support sociologists' fairness interpretation. Interestingly, when they divide their sample into younger and older cohorts, they find the fairness effect stronger for the younger cohort, suggesting that recent egalitarian trends in society do in fact play a role in how specialization affects marital stability.

Yet another mechanism that could erode the association between specialization and marital stability is via the income effect (Cherlin, 1979) where higher household<sup>h</sup> incomes from dual-earner households reduce financial stress and increase marital stability. Poortman and Kalmijn's study of Dutch couples appears to support this hypothesis, showing that low household income and financial problems increase divorce risk, although women's employment does have a negative effect on marital stability.

Studying market intensity of wives by cohort reveals that longer working hours for women increases divorce risk especially among the older cohort, supporting the notion that it is societal norms towards women's work, rather than economic losses from reduced specialization that adds to divorce risk.

They further test for a relationship between economic status/market capital and divorce risk, given the conflicting results tests for the financial independence hypothesis raised earlier. They find that the wife's economic status and wife's

work experience does **not** increase divorce risk despite increasing wives' financial independence. However, wife's education does strongly do so. They suggest that this contradiction could be explained in terms of the cultural component of education: higher education is associated with more progressive norms that could create marital tensions and competition between husband and wife.

Most interesting of all is perhaps their findings that divorce risk are lower for women who do not cohabit before marriage, who come from religious backgrounds and from rural areas. They posit that this provides evidence that traditional norms and social integration are important divorce barriers. Similarly, that parental divorce was found to increase divorce risk was taken to support the sociologist view that "divorce is transmitted from generation to generation".

Poortman and Kalmijn's study appears then to support the sociologist interpretation of how specialization may stabilize marriages: via the positive effects of conformity with norms and psycho-emotional dependence, rather than the economist interpretation of gains to specialization and **financial** dependence. Evolving norms would then require more **egalitarian** divisions of labour in order for marriages to remain stable.

Structural and Marxist feminist literature echo these same thoughts. Structural feminists stress that structural elements in society influence actions and

behaviour. Delphy and Leonard (1992) for example argue that the male gender is given power and control over the female gender, and ideologies and norms continually reinforce male dominance patterns. Mothers face mobility constraints, leaving them little career opportunity and choice which depresses their actual and potential earnings, encouraging men to take on the provider role further. Where structural feminists stress structure, Marxist feminists point to agency in the exploitation of women. Whatmore (1990) for example, posits that patriarchal structures continually interact with evolving social class which shapes female marker rôles. Brines (1993) similarly looks to symbolism as an explanatory factor in the persistence of norms regarding women's tasks. Where sexual identities are questioned, for example in marriages where the wife earns more or has higher status than her husband, housework is used to symbolically reassert one's masculinity or femininity.

Newell's (1993) study of the superwoman syndrome in the UK also supports sociologists' take on how specialization affects marital relations, finding that despite an apparent change in gender order in the UK, there is both support for patriarchy as well as resistance to traditional divisions of labour.

Thus, feminists appear to join sociologists in asking if it is tradition rather than rational optimization that is the force behind household task allocation decisions. These decisions may in fact be fraught with issues of independence, power and

societal norms. If so, then orthodox economic models which study household allocation decisions may be inadequate, having excluded these elements.

#### **4.3.2 When Specialization Destabilizes Marital Relations**

To what extent could specialization destabilize marriages? Lamert (2003) notes that in orthodox economic models, specialization is said to be beneficial to marriages as it is assumed that specialization maximizes utility of the couple as a whole. However, if combined with conflicting ideological factors (an egalitarian gender ideology, for example), specialization would trigger psychological responses which would offset the economic gains to specialization. By ignoring ideological context, economic models do not fully capture the costs of work arrangements and thus cannot fully explain divorce risk.

England and Farkas (1986) and Schwartz (1998) further note that high specialization creates dissimilarity between partners which may trigger distress within the marriage, especially among non-traditional household. A dual-earner couple on the other hand, is more likely to share a more common experience, creating a cohesiveness that generates utility-increasing benefits in the marriage.

The above arguments appear strong enough to warrant more focused research. The next section presents Australian evidence of household attitudes toward

household allocation decisions, providing illuminating insights into how economic models of the household can be further improved.

#### **4.4 Empirical Evidence of Household Attitudes Toward Division of Labour Arrangements**

Recent studies by Benin and Agostinelli (1988), Blair and Johnson (1992), Lennon and Rosenfield (1994), Greenstein (1996) and Demaris and Longmore (1996) have found that women appear satisfied with unequal divisions of labour. Baxter and Western (1996), spurred by these findings, proceeded to use Australian data from a 1993 Class Structure of Australia project to examine men's and women's satisfaction with domestic division of labour arrangements. They note that despite rapid increases in female labour force participation rates and employment trends of mothers remaining in the labour force throughout their child-bearing and child-rearing years, there has been little change in domestic division of labour patterns. They also observe that employed women spend at least twice the time on domestic work compared to their husbands. That women appear satisfied with such arrangements is seen as a paradox. Drawing on sociologist literature, they put forth and then test possible explanations to this paradox.

The hypotheses tested were the economic power and resources hypothesis (women with less control over economic resources and fewer economic options

outside the marriage, as indicated by lower earnings, lower education and fewer career opportunities, would have more to lose in divorce and would therefore lower their expectations of a man's role in domestic work), the gender ideology hypothesis (that women with traditional ideologies would see domestic work as natural to women) and the paid work time hypothesis (if husbands work longer hours in paid employment, wives may be more willing to accept a heavier load of domestic work).

They also draw on Benin and Agostinelli's (1988) findings that wives' satisfaction levels increase when husbands perform some traditional "women's tasks" regardless of amount of time spent on total domestic work. They test if such task segregation effects may be more important than time allocation in perceptions of fairness.

They include as parameters in their model gender role attitudes, spouse's contribution to family income, amount of time spent in employment and men's involvement in non-traditional household tasks. Using regression analysis to predict women's satisfaction with arrangements of the division of childcare and housework, they find that despite spending more total time on domestic work than men, 40% of women were very satisfied with how childcare tasks were divided, and 47% were very satisfied with how housework tasks were divided. There was also a clear gender pattern in housework tasks, with women taking primary responsibility for indoor work (such as cooking and cleaning) and men

taking responsibility for outdoor work (such as lawn-mowing and home maintenance). This pattern was consistent with Baxter's 1993 findings.

Testing these patterns against the parameters mentioned earlier, they find that neither the economic power and resource hypothesis nor the paid work time hypothesis were significant determinants of satisfaction with the division of housework and childcare. However, gender role attitudes were significant determinants of satisfaction with the division of housework (but not childcare) and men's involvement in non-traditional domestic tasks (both housework and childcare) were significant in explaining satisfaction with unequal time divisions of labour.

For the latter, they explain that male involvement in traditionally female domestic tasks created perceptions that husbands were contributing beyond normal expectations, making wives feel more satisfied with unequal time divisions of labour.

That task segregation may be more important than time allocation has been echoed in both feminist and sociologist literature. Hessing (1994) questions economists' usage of time units to measure work, particularly domestic work, noting that some responsibilities overlap and are performed together with other tasks. In sociologist literature, Hochschild (1989) notes that where tasks are

segregated by gender, partners would be less aware of their spouse's actual contribution to domestic work since such work is less observable than if the tasks were performed together by both husband and wife. This may lead them to overestimate their own contribution and underestimate their partner's, leading to the perception that the arrangement is unfair to self. However, when spouses venture into non-traditional tasks (as in Baxter and Western's study), their contribution becomes more visible, and the existing division of labour arrangement would be perceived as more fair, regardless of how much time each spouse actually spends on total domestic work.

Baxter and Western's findings that gender ideology is important when evaluating the fairness of the division of housework, and involvement in non-traditional housework and childcare tasks support sociologists' view that norms and socio-cultural factors are crucial in determining the fairness of a division of labour arrangement.

Economic models have failed to incorporate this element in models of household allocation. Even bargaining models have been accused of lacking the subjective evaluation element. They focus on behavioral components rather than attitudes and **perceptions** of behaviour. Social exchange and equity theories and some of the empirical work cited here suggest that evaluations of fairness will affect bargaining games and decisions on the division of labour.



Baxter and Western also comment that perceptions of fairness may be skewed by reference groups and psychological justification. If women compare their workloads not to that of their spouses but to that of their mothers, then they may perceive an unequal division of domestic work (whether by time or task) as fair as long as their husbands' involvement is greater than that of their fathers. Also, in the face of widespread inequality in both the workplace and at home, women may adjust expectations downward, dealing with the inequity by psychologically justifying it. This is consistent with equity theory and Thomson's (1991) opinion that when we view justice as a social process, what is considered fair would be defined via interaction with others and this very much depends on the social sphere under consideration. Perceptions of fairness are not universally-defined.