

Thinking about household chores burdens women's mental health

Women experience more negative effects from child care and housework compared with men, such as higher depression rates, partly due to the heavier cognitive load they carry.

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When you think about housework, you likely think of actions; scrubbing the dishes, running errands, chopping vegetables for dinner. And it is not news to say that mothers often shoulder the burden for most of those activities. But there is an invisible dimension of household labour that unfolds behind the scenes, the cognitive effort that goes into anticipating needs, planning, organising and delegating household tasks. In other words, someone has to remember to replace the dish soap and select which vegetables to chop.

Our research found that this cognitive dimension of housework, often called the "mental load," is divided even more unevenly within couples than the physical dimension and it seems to take a particular mental health toll on women. According to the study published in the Archives of Women's Mental Health, mothers who take on a more disproportionate

share of cognitive household labour report higher levels of depression, stress, relationship dissatisfaction and burnout.

Tracking who does what

We asked 322 mothers of young children about who in their family is responsible for 30 common household tasks. We collaborated with the creators of the Fair Play system, a book and card game designed to better quantify the division of labour within households, to divide each task into two dimensions; cognitive (anticipating, planning, delegating and thinking about household tasks) and physical (the hands-on execution of household tasks). We then examined how these tasks are shared between partners.

We found a striking gender disparity: Mothers not only performed more physical housework but also carried a significantly greater share of cognitive labour compared with their partners.

On average, mothers reported being



On average, mothers reported being responsible for about 64 percent of all physical household labour compared with their partners' 36 percent. PHOTO/PEX-ELS.COM

responsible for about 73 percent of all cognitive household labour compared with their partners' 27 percent and 64 percent of all physical household labour compared with their partners' 36 percent. Indeed, for every single task we examined, the gender difference was larger for the cognitive dimension than the physical execution dimension.

There was only one task in which fathers did more planning and execution;

taking out the garbage. Fathers also carried out more home maintenance tasks, but mothers did more of the related planning. Interestingly, while an unequal division of physical tasks was linked to worse couple relationship quality, it was the cognitive labour that had a more profound impact on women's psychological well-being.

Family dynamics have societal impact. An unequal division of household la-

bour is a key driver of global gender inequity, suppressing women's full participation in the paid workforce and significantly affecting women's health and well-being.

The study is one of the first to investigate the cognitive dimension of household labour and its effects on maternal mental health. Cognitive labour may be particularly taxing for women because it often runs behind the scenes and goes unacknowledged or unappreciated by others. It also pulls mental energy away from other priorities.

Additional studies indicate that women experience more negative effects from child care and housework compared with men, such as higher depression rates, partly due to the heavier cognitive load they carry.

What still is not known

Our study was limited by its reliance on self-reported household labour and by the fact that we were able to collect data only from mothers in cohabiting, heterosexual couple relationships. Future studies can survey both partners and directly observe what chores couples do at home. They can also look at different kinds of relationship configurations, including gay and lesbian couples.

We also do not know much about the long-term effects of the division of cognitive labour on women's mental health and cognitive functioning.

The unfair division of housework is a frequent source of stress in relationships and often cited by women as a reason for divorce. The cognitive load may be an underappreciated aspect of the domestic workload that warrants more attention from couples therapists, mental health counselors and premarital relationship educators.