

Is the traditional gender-specialised division of labour still associated with higher fertility?

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In Great Britain, compared to 20 years ago, the traditional gender division of labour is no longer benefiting fertility, note Muzhi Zhou and Man-Yee Kan. Nowadays, couples with more children are less likely to adopt the male-breadwinner, female-homemaker model, and those who have a traditional division of labour are no longer more likely to give birth.

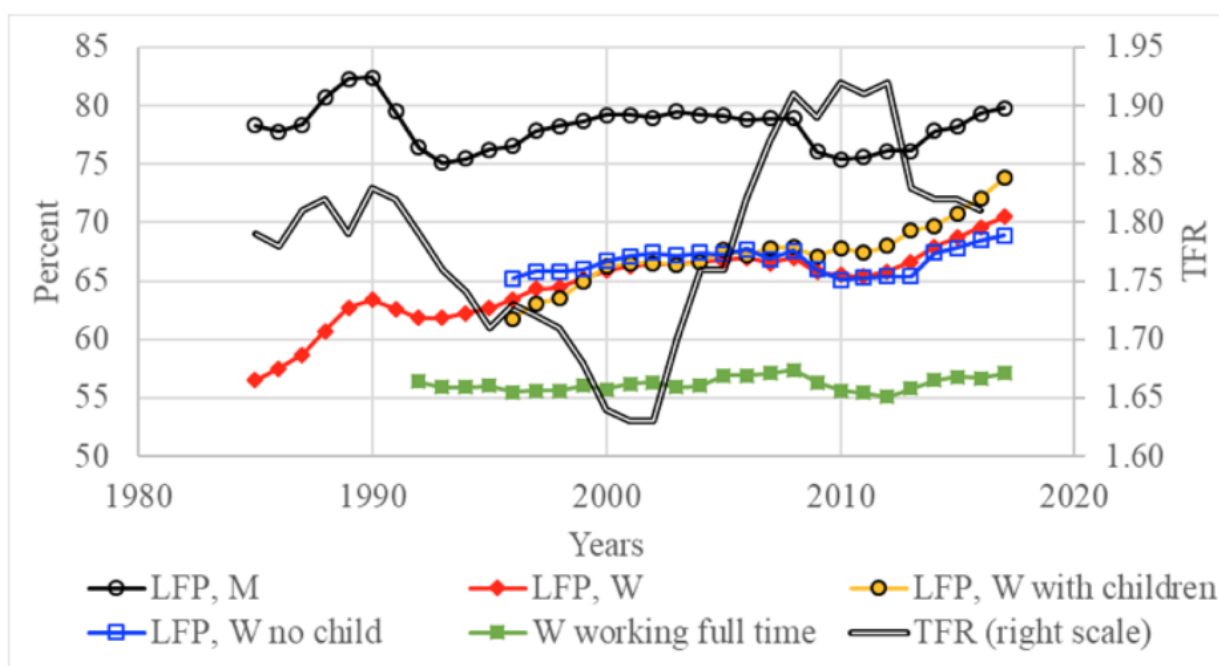
Rearing young children is money- and time-consuming nowadays. Most often, labour market opportunities must be sacrificed to meet the care needs of children. Household specialization seems to be a smart decision, where one partner who earns more money pursues their working career unaffected by family responsibilities, and the other partner sacrifices their labour market opportunities and takes care of family life. This arrangement minimizes the family's financial cost of parenthood, and if it is the father who earns and the mother who cares, this model is consonant with people's gender expectations and is socially approved for childrearing. Not surprisingly, therefore, families with a male primary breadwinner and a female primary caregiver remain common.

However, this traditional division of labour has encountered many challenges in the past few decades. Growing economic uncertainties and the rising cost of living make the family model with only one full-time worker a risky choice. Jobs are becoming less stable, which also threatens partnership stability and deters people from having more children. It is becoming more difficult to make the decision to leave the labour market, even temporarily (Luppi 2016).

We also know that while childcare services could massively alleviate the time pressure of rearing young children, they remain extremely expensive and inaccessible for many families in England. If means-tested cash transfers from the government are excluded, England is the OECD country where parents pay the most for childcare. A full-time nursery fee for a child

under two is £242 per week in 2019, compared to £159 in 2008. Childcare benefits in England have slowly expanded but remain severely limited. In the 1990s, parents could apply for vouchers to cover certain childcare expenses. In the 2000s, for children aged 3 to 4, parents were entitled to 12.5 to 15 hours of free childcare per week for 33 to 38 weeks per year. Since September 2017, working parents with children aged 3 to 4 have been entitled to 30 hours of free childcare per week.¹With this recent expansion of free childcare coverage, the need for an adult to stay at home and provide care has been reduced, and more mothers with young dependent children are working. Figure 1 shows a growing fertility level from 2000 with women’s increased labour force participation. There is also a change in social attitudes. Fewer people now believe that women should stay at home and care for young children, although the change in norms and attitudes has been slow and incomplete (British Social Attitudes 2018).

Figure 1. Total fertility rate (TFR, right scale) and labour force participation rates (LFP, left scale) in the UK, 1985-2017



Note: M: Men; W=Women.

Source: Office for National Statistics & Labour Force Survey

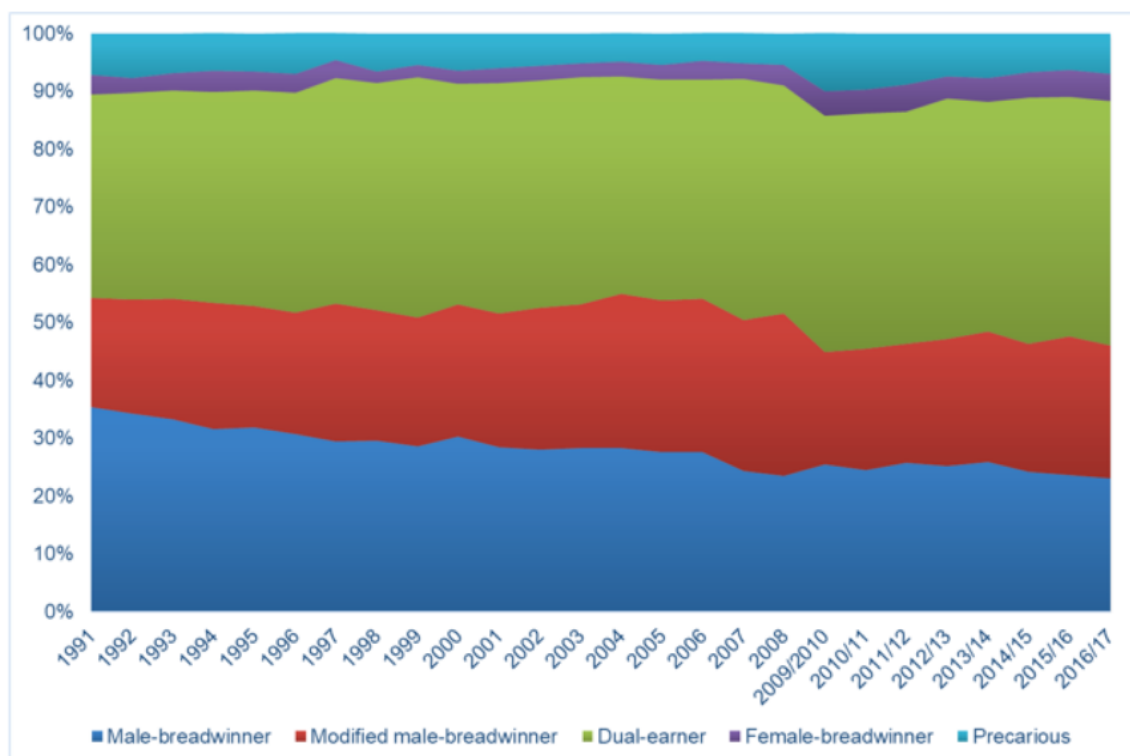
A re-evaluation and new evidence

A recent study (Zhou and Kan 2019) re-examines the often-assumed positive relationship between the gendered division of labour and fertility using nationally representative, large-scale, and long-term longitudinal data for the United Kingdom. We suspect that this positive link has weakened over the past 30 years given the changes discussed above. The gendered division of labour is measured by pooling the couple’s participation in both the labour market and housework and then classifying couples into various levels of gender traditionalism. This classification considers how couples share their efforts in paid and unpaid work and is a direct and concrete measure of the gendered division of labour.

We classified all married and cohabiting couples of prime working and childbearing age into five types with respect to the division of labour: the male-breadwinner type (most traditional,

27.8%), the modified male-breadwinner type where the female partner works part-time or earns much less than the male partner (23.1%), the dual-earner type where both partners work full-time and share housework more or less equally (39.3%), the female-breadwinner type (least traditional, 3.2%), and the precarious type where neither partner works full-time (6.6%). Figure 2 shows that the proportion of couples with a male breadwinner and female homemaker has declined steadily since 1991, and the dual-earner type is becoming more common.

Figure 2. Distribution of the division of labour types among cohabiting and married couples (women aged 20-44 and men aged 20-59) in Great Britain, 1991 to 2017



Source: Selected samples from the harmonized British Household Panel Survey (BHPS) and the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHSL).

Following the same couples over time, we analyse the likelihood of a birth following a change in the division of labour type. For example, a dual-earner couple could shift to a male-breadwinner model if the female partner loses her job. A significant weakening trend in the positive link between the traditional male-earner model and childbearing is noted. In the 1990s, if a dual-earner couple adopted the traditional male-breadwinner model, they were three times more likely to have a child in the following years. In contrast, from 2009 to 2017, the shift from a dual-earner model into the male-breadwinner arrangement had little impact on the likelihood of a subsequent birth.

We also examine what happens to a couple's division of labour type when they have children. As expected, the birth of a child is strongly correlated with a more traditional division of labour. Couples having a first child were almost 20 times more likely to adopt a traditional division of labour arrangement in the 1990s. In recent years, however, from 2009 to 2017, couples having a first child are only about 8 times more likely to adopt the traditional division of labour arrangement, indicating that men's and women's responses to parenthood are

becoming more similar.

Implications and Discussion of Gender and Family

It has been argued that improvements in gender equality, especially in the strength of women's economic positions, are responsible for the declining fertility level since the late 1970s. However, the societal context, which used to enhance the positive link between a traditional gender division of labour and fertility, has changed. Over the past 25 years, families that rely on a single earner's income have experienced more economic uncertainties. At a time of severe job insecurity, dual-earner couples should have greater financial stability than single-earner or 1.5-earner couples. The obligation to stay at home to provide care is also reduced thanks to subsidised childcare provision. The weakened positive link between the traditional male-breadwinner model and fertility highlights the importance of the social context in which the relationship is situated.

The argument that gender-egalitarian roles within families are detrimental for fertility is no longer valid in Great Britain today. Notably, we are yet to observe that dual-earner families are more likely to have more children than the traditional male-breadwinner families. The reason could be due to the persisting incompatibility between childrearing and full-time employment, especially for women (Zhou 2017). Comparative studies have shown that the positive link between dual-earner couples and fertility is stronger in countries with more generous childcare provision (Greulich, Guergoat-Larivière and Thevenon 2018). Further improvements in gender equality and especially in resolving the conflict between work and family would ease the financial pressure on families and make it easier for people to realize their fertility intentions by encouraging the dual-earner model and providing financial security for childrearing.

Reference

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Footnotes

¹ Primary education usually starts at age 5 in England.