

# **From gender to class inequalities in domestic labor?**

**Abstract for the European Population Conference 2020**

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## **Introduction:**

In recent research on gender inequality the hypothesis has surfaced that an increase in gender equality results from an increase in the take-up of domestic services by better-off households. The provision of these services - in-turn - is primarily supplied by female low class service workers, who are situated in families, where a traditional division of labor persists (sources).

This study aims to disentangle this hypothesis, which actually involves a set of assumptions by answering the following research questions:

- 1) What are the exact socio-demographic characteristics of those who supply, and those who purchase these services? This includes their positioning in the income and wage distribution, and their family and care obligations.
- 2) Is the provision of cleaning services primarily a female phenomenon, associated with low upward mobility and an extensive asymmetry in the private division of housework?
- 3) Does the take-up of cleaning services result in a more gender-egalitarian division of housework among better-off couples?

While the focus on the aspects addressed under 1) aim to generally improve our knowledge on a particular type of work in the service economy, 2) & 3) specifically aim to shed light on the associated equality and mobility processes, associated with contexts that link the provision and take-up of domestic services.

The research focus rests on Germany, a welfare state, where - especially in the West, most couples still rely on a sole or modified male breadwinner, and the female integration into the labor force is to a large extent characterized by part-time work. The micro-data used for analyzing the outlined research questions is provided by the Socio-economic-panel-study (SOEP), a representative, annual panel survey that

currently spans over thirty years, and involves a total of more than 40.000 adult respondents.

**Abstract:**

Background and research question

The goal of this study is twofold: First, I investigate to what extent an increase in gender equality in the division of housework in couples with a high socio-economic status is related to increased use of market-based household services. In a second step, I analyze to what extent these services are provided by women with a lower socio-economic status (SES). The synthesis of these two perspectives suggests that an increase in gender equality in high-status couples is linked to increasing class inequalities.

This study presents an empirical analysis of key characteristics and changes in the use of personal and household services in Germany covering a period of more than two decades. I use longitudinal data from the Socio-Economic Panel Study from 1991-2017, as well as data from a module of the 2015 SOEP Innovation Sample (SOEP-IS), "Household Use of Personal and Household Services". The focus is on the questions to what extent the use of household services has increased during the period of observation, whether their use is limited to high-SES couples, and to what extent these services have become professionalized or remain predominantly marginal or precarious work.

## Theoretical framework

Research on the division of domestic labor shows that women are still doing the majority of housework. However, the gender gap in housework has been narrowing in recent years. This increase in gender equality is particularly prevalent among dual-earner couples with high income and high educational attainment (Evertsson *et al.*, 2009). From a perspective of stratification, cross-national evidence suggests that housework time differs vastly between the rich and the poor, in particular among women (<Heisig, 2011>). High-SES couples have a limited amount of time available to do housework as well as the economic resources to afford such services. From a perspective of bargaining power, women in these couples have a higher share of relative income at their disposal, which allows them to reduce their involvement in housework (Evertsson and Neramo, 2007). Previous research corroborates this notion: Part of the change in the relative share of housework can be attributed to men doing slightly more housework, but the majority of the change is driven by women doing considerably less housework than in the 1960s. This reduction in female housework is a result of time-saving innovations in household appliances, but also of structural shifts (increasing female employment, reduced family size, and later marriages) and the consumption of market-based household services (Bianchi *et al.*, 2000; Killewald, 2011; Craig and Baxter, 2016).

This study takes the latter perspective as its starting point in recognition of the evidence that market-based domestic services are primarily provided by women. Moreover, these housework substitutes often constitute precarious work with low pay, and are often not covered by social insurance or employment protection since household services are primarily informal work, frequently provided on a marginal basis, and are occasionally illegal or undeclared. In several welfare states including Sweden and Germany, tax incentives have been tailored to make household services more affordable. The fact that this work, however, is often provided by economically dependent women has raised concerns that these lower-status individuals face the

burden of "oppressive double shifts", doing housework both at home and in paid employment (John R. Bowman and Alyson M. Cole, 2009; Young, 2009). In this sense, increasing gender equality in high-SES couples may come at the cost of aggravating class inequalities.

#### Data, analytical strategy, and preliminary findings

The empirical investigation is based on data from the Socio-Economic Panel Study (SOEP) 1991-2017, as well as on data from the SOEP Innovation Sample (SOEP-IS), using the 2015 module "Household Use of Personal and Household Services". This module aims at providing an in-depth picture of status differentials among respondents who use household services, and a picture of the individuals providing these services<sup>1</sup>.

The core analysis relies on data from the SOEP-Core study, focusing on the years 1991-2017. An initial investigation uses these data as cross-sections with the primary goal of delineating aspects of social change that occurred during the period of investigation. Here, we are interested in who is providing household services, using occupational codes (ISCO) to identify individuals providing household services. The results suggest that the majority of contributions to cleaning and housework are made by women from lower social strata. Moreover, this type of work is often done during irregular working hours, and the women doing this work are often trapped in low-paying jobs. The duration analyses show only small changes in these aspects over time. Moreover, the supply and demand for household services has increased slightly since 1990, but at a very slow pace, with about 7-9% of all households making use of these services. Data on the amount of pay for household services provided since 2010

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<sup>1</sup> The data from this module is not available for analysis, yet.

suggest that most couples employ housework providers at a level that evades tax and social security contributions, providing another link to the precariousness of the working conditions.

Moreover, I apply two random effects approaches, which aim to cover the demand or need for household services and how this affects individual contributions to housework within couples. The first set of models is focused on determining, whether changes in individual income, couples' relative income, and working hours result in men and women making use of household services. The second approach uses relative share of housework of man and woman in couple as an outcome variable, investigating, how the use of household services affects the division of housework within couples. Preliminary findings suggest that it is primarily income gains that increase the likelihood to hire housework service providers. However, the overall reduction in individual housework contributions remains modest. An increase in working hours alone without income gains shows no clear patterns of an alleviated demand for external housework services. Couples with high income and income gains are the main consumers of household services.

Keywords: domestic labor, couple division of housework, market work, time availability, housework services.

Literature overview:

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