

Trends in household work

Unpaid household work, including cooking, cleaning, shopping and caring for children, takes up a substantial proportion of people's waking lives. It contributes to the functioning of domestic life, providing goods and services that would otherwise have to be paid for. While it is excluded from most official measures of economic activity, the value of unpaid household work in Australia has been estimated as equivalent to up to half of Gross Domestic Product.¹

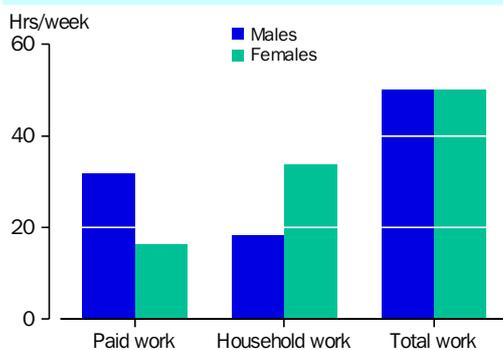
Paid and unpaid work

Over recent decades, economic and social changes have increased opportunities for women to participate in the paid work force. Between 1992 and 2006, the proportion of women who were employed increased from 48% to 55%. This led to an increase in the average time women spent on paid work, by an hour and 45 minutes, to an average of 16 hours and 25 minutes a week. This is much lower than a 'standard' working week due to the number of women who are either not employed or employed part-time.

In 2006, women spent almost twice as much time on household work as men did. The opposite was true of paid work.

While women were assuming a greater role in the workplace, they did not compensate by reducing work around the home. Women spent around the same amount of time on household work (which includes caring for children as well as domestic activities and shopping) in 2006 (an average of 33 hours and 45 minutes a week) as they had in 1992.

Time spent on paid work and household work by sex^(a) — 2006



(a) Average hours per week by all persons for primary activities

Source: 2006 Time Use Survey

Data sources and definitions

The data in this article are drawn from the ABS Time Use Surveys conducted in 1992 and 2006. The surveys collected information on the time people spent on a range of activities, including household work. People aged 15 years and over participating in the survey kept a diary record of their activities (including their nature, timing and duration) over two specified days of the reference period.

Any activity that respondents described as their 'main activity' at a given time was recorded as a *primary* activity. If it was described as 'something else they were doing at the same time', it was recorded as a *secondary* activity.

In this article *household work* refers to unpaid domestic, child care and purchasing activities. *Domestic activities* include cooking, cleaning, laundry, grounds and animal care, home maintenance, and household management (e.g. paying bills and organising budgets). *Child care activities* include caring for, playing with and helping children. *Purchasing activities* include shopping for goods and services, enquiring about purchases, organising and paying for the purchase of goods and services, as well as associated travel. There may be a recreational component to some of these activities, for example shopping, gardening, or walking the dog. However, we have treated these activities as part of household work for the purposes of this article.

Voluntary work and other unpaid caring activities such as caring for adults with a disability or long-term health condition were included in the Time Use Survey but for the purposes of this article are not included. These topics have been featured in other *Australian Social Trends* articles and ABS publications. For further information see *Australian Social Trends 2008*, 'Voluntary Work', pp. 42–45 and *A Profile of Carers in Australia 2008* (ABS cat. no. 4448.0).

Paid work includes the time spent on a person's main job and other jobs, as well as work breaks, looking for work, and communication and travel time associated with employment related activities.

Over the same period, men took on more household work. Between 1992 and 2006, the average time men spent on household work rose by an hour and 25 minutes to 18 hours and 20 minutes a week. The time men spent in paid work remained steady at an average of around 31 hours and 50 minutes a week.

In 2006 women still did around two-thirds of household work, while men did two-thirds of paid work. In terms of total workload, both men and women spent an average of 50 hours and 10 minutes a week in a combination of paid work and household work.² This represents an increase since 1992 of around two hours a week for both men and women (or around four days over the course of a year).

Along with more time spent on paid work and household work, men and women also spent more time sleeping in 2006 compared with 1992. The extra time spent working and sleeping came at the expense of time spent on outdoor sports and general free time.

Still a case of men's work and women's work?

Although different gender roles are apparent in the division of household work (with women doing most of the indoor tasks and men dominating the outdoor activities) there is evidence that these roles have become less rigid in recent years. In 2006 men were spending more time on traditionally 'female' domestic activities such as cooking and laundry than in 1992, and less time on outdoor activities such as lawn mowing, and home maintenance.

As women, on average, increased the time spent in paid work between 1992 and 2006, the average time spent on domestic activities by women declined, particularly laundry and ironing, and other housework such as cleaning. However, this was partly offset by an increase in time spent on household management activities such as paying bills. Women also spent more time on other household work such as child care, so that the time spent on household work overall did not change significantly.

One change in time use patterns is an increase in the time both mothers and fathers spend caring for children as a primary activity. While differences in the way activities were coded between the 1992 and 2006 surveys may explain some of the increase in time spent

Measuring time spent on household work

Data from the Time Use Survey can be analysed in terms of the total time recorded for an activity divided by the number of people who recorded time for that activity (*participant average*), or the total time for an activity divided by the total population or a sub-group of the population (*all person average*).

The *participant average* provides an accurate estimate of the time individuals actually spent doing an activity on an average day and is useful for comparing activities (e.g. overall time spent on paid work by people who were at work compared with household work by people who did household work). However, it does not account for people who usually do the activity (e.g. paid work), but happened to complete the time use diary on days they didn't do it (e.g. when on leave from work).

By taking account of all people, including those who did not record time for an activity, the *all person average* provides an alternative estimate of average time that can be used to compare groups in the population, and assess time use patterns over a longer period such as a week. For these reasons, the analysis in this article is based on all person averages.

playing, reading and talking with children, there was also an increase in the amount of time mothers and fathers spent minding children and travel time associated with caring for children.³

As people often look after children at the same time as doing other activities, to get a complete picture of time spent caring for children both primary and secondary activities need to be considered. Taking secondary activities into account shows that in 2006 mothers spent an

Time spent on household work by sex^{(a)(b)} — 1992 and 2006

	1992		2006		Time use ratio ^(b)	
	Males	Females	Males	Females	1992	2006
	hrs and mins/week	hrs and mins/week	hrs and mins/week	hrs and mins/week	no.	no.
Domestic activities	11:19	21:14	11:19	20:04	1.9	1.8
Food preparation and clean up	2:48	8:17	3:23	8:03	3.0	2.4
Laundry and clothes care	0:28	3:58	0:35	3:23	8.5	5.8
Other housework	1:03	4:54	1:10	3:51	4.7	3.3
Grounds and animal care	3:30	2:34	2:41	2:27	0.7	0.9
Home maintenance	2:20	0:28	1:38	0:21	0.2	0.2
Household management	0:21	0:28	0:49	1:10	1.3	1.4
Child care	1:38	5:43	2:34	6:53	3.5	2.7
Purchasing goods and services	3:58	6:25	4:26	6:46	1.6	1.5
Total household work	16:55	33:22	18:19	33:43	2.0	1.8
Paid work	31:16	14:42	31:51	16:27	0.5	0.5

(a) Average hours and minutes per week by all persons for primary activities. The differences from figures quoted in the text are due to rounding

(b) Ratio of average time spent by women on an activity to the average time spent by men

Source: ABS Time Use Survey, 1992 and 2006

average of 55 hours and 20 minutes a week on child care activities, and fathers 26 hours and 10 minutes (both relatively steady since 1992).

...but shared differently than in the past

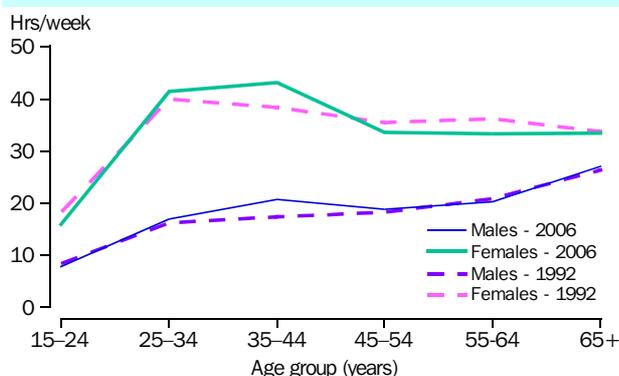
While men are doing slightly more household work than in the past, in 2006 women still did around 1.8 times as much as men (compared with twice as much in 1992). Although women are spending less time cleaning and doing laundry, they still spent almost six times as long on laundry as men in 2006, and more than three times as long on other housework such as cleaning. Women also spent almost two and a half times as long on food preparation and clean up, despite men doing more of the cooking than in the past.

While men are taking on a greater role with respect to child care than in the past, women on average spent more than two and a half times as long caring for children as men did in 2006. There were also differences in the type of child care activities parents did, with fathers spending a greater proportion of their child care time on play activities (41% compared with 25% for mothers), and mothers spending more of their time on physical and emotional care activities (43%, compared with 27% for fathers).

In 2006, home maintenance was the only area of household work on which men spent considerably more time than women, despite men having cut back in this area since 1992.

Overall, people are spending less time cleaning or maintaining their homes, and less time looking after their gardens than in the past. While this may imply that people are giving lower priority to housework and maintenance, it's likely that people are also finding more time-efficient ways to do the domestic duties, including the increasing use of labour saving devices such as dishwashers and dryers.

Time spent on household work by sex and age group^(a) — 1992 and 2006



(a) Average hours per week by all persons for primary activities

Source: ABS Time Use Survey, 1992 and 2006

It may also be that people are paying others to do things they previously did themselves, such as cleaning and mowing lawns. Although there is no comparable data for 1992, in 2006, 10% of households paid for dry cleaning, ironing or laundry services, 9% paid for domestic cleaning services, and more than a quarter of households either paid for lawn or gardening services (13%) or had grounds maintained by a body corporate (13%).

Household work across the life course

The amount of time people devote to household work (i.e. domestic activities, caring for children and shopping) can vary throughout different stages of the life course. For women, time spent on household work tends to be greatest during the peak child-rearing period from 25 to 44 years. In 2006, women in this age group with children aged under 15 years spent around 53 hours a week on household work (the average for all women aged 25–44 years was 42 hours per week). This compared with 16 hours for all women aged 15–24 years, and around 33 hours and 30 minutes a week for those aged 45 years and over.

For men, time spent on household work increases with age. In 2006, men aged 15–24 years spent an average of just under eight hours per week on household work, compared with between 17 and 21 hours for those aged 25–64 years, and 27 hours a week for men aged 65 years and over.

The mix of household activities also varies over the life course. For example, the proportion of men and women who care for children, and the time they spend doing so, peaks among those aged 25–44 years.

In contrast to child care activities, both participation in and time spent on domestic activities tends to increase with age for men and women. Older men and women, for example, spend much more time cooking and gardening in their retirement years. Men also spend more time shopping as they get older. This may reflect changes in time use as a result of being widowed, or caring for a partner in older age. In other cases, people may see gardening or preparing meals as an enjoyable way to spend the additional time available in retirement.

...changes over time

While there was little change in the overall pattern of household work across the age groups from 1992 to 2006, there were shifts among some age groups for particular activities. For example, people aged 15–24 years were less likely to engage in domestic activities in 2006 than in 1992.

There was also a fall in the time women aged 35–64 years spent on domestic activities, particularly laundry and other housework such as cleaning. However, in terms of time spent on household work overall, this fall was offset by an increase in the proportion of women aged 35–44 years who engaged in child care activities, and in the time that these women spent caring for children. These time use patterns were also evident, though to a lesser degree, among men aged 35–44 years.

The impact of life course transitions on household work

Changing from one living arrangement to another can also influence the amount and type of household work people do.

...moving out of home

Not surprisingly, moving out of the parental home is associated with an increase in time spent doing household work. In 2006, men aged 20–49 years who were living alone or in group households spent significantly more time on domestic activities such as cooking, and more time shopping, than those living with parents.

The impact of moving out was not as dramatic for women because women living in the parental home spend much more time on household work than men. Women aged 20–49 years living alone or in group households spent more time doing domestic activities and shopping compared with those living at home.

...moving in with a partner

The transition from living alone or in a group household to moving in with a partner increases the amount of time women spend on household work.⁴ In 2006, women aged 20–49 years in couple households without children did almost six hours more household work a week than those living alone or in group households. In contrast, moving in with a partner did not significantly affect the amount of time men spent on household work.

Women living with partners spent considerably more time on domestic activities including cooking, laundry and other housework such as cleaning, compared with those living alone or in group houses.

...becoming a parent

While having children aged under 15 years increases the volume of household work for both men and women, the additional work is largely taken up by women.⁵

In 2006, mothers aged 20–49 years in couple relationships did 29 hours more household work per week than those without children. While much of this was due to the time mothers spent on child care activities, they also spent an extra seven hours a week on domestic activities.

Fathers aged 20–49 years in couple families spent roughly the same amount of time on domestic activities, and less time shopping, compared with those without children. However, fathers spent nine hours a week on average caring for children.

Time spent on household work by sex and selected living arrangements^{(a)(b)} — 2006

Time spent on activity: hours and mins/week

Living arrangements	<i>Domestic activities</i>	<i>Child care activities</i>	<i>Purchasing activities</i>	<i>Total household work</i>
Males				
Living at home with parents	5:22	*0:14	3:09	8:45
Living alone or in group household	8:45	**0:35	5:29	14:50
Partner in a couple family with no children	9:41	**0:14	4:12	14:07
Parents in a couple family with children <15 years	10:09	8:59	3:16	22:24
Females				
Living at home with parents	7:28	*0:35	5:22	13:25
Living alone or in group household	9:55	**0:50	7:14	17:58
Partner in a couple family with no children	16:27	**0:35	6:32	23:41
Parents in a couple family with children <15 years	23:41	22:17	6:47	52:44

* Estimate has a standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution

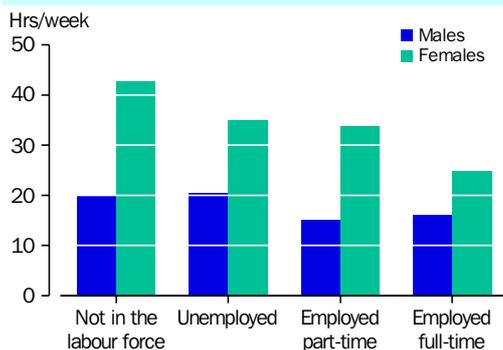
** Estimate has a standard error of greater than 50% and is considered too unreliable for general use

(a) Average hours and minutes per week by all persons for primary activities

(b) For people aged 20–49 years

Source: 2006 Time Use Survey

Time spent on household work by sex and status in employment^{(a)(b)} — 2006



(a) Average hours per week by all persons for primary activities
(b) Aged 15–64 years

Source: 2006 Time Use Survey

While mothers spent less time in paid work than women without children, they also got less sleep and had less time for recreation and leisure activities. For fathers, the extra household work came at the expense of sleep and recreation and leisure time, but not paid work.

Employment status

The amount of time people spend on household work often shapes or is shaped by their participation in paid work. In 2006, people who were not employed (i.e. either not in the labour force or unemployed) spent considerably more time on household work than those who were employed. This pattern was much more pronounced for women than it was for men.

Women aged 15–64 years who were not in the labour force spent an extra 17 hours and 50 minutes per week on household work compared with those who were employed full-time. Most of this additional time was spent cooking, cleaning and looking after children. However, women working full-time spent almost 65 hours in a combination of paid work and household work (total work), compared

with around 43 hours for those women not in the labour force.

On average, men aged 15–64 years who were unemployed or not in the labour force did between four and five hours more household work per week than those who were employed full-time or part-time. Men who were not in the labour force or who were unemployed spent more time cooking, cleaning and looking after the garden.

Among employed men, there was little difference in time spent on household work between those who worked full-time and part-time. However, among women, those working part-time did almost nine hours more household work a week than those employed full-time, with around half of this extra time spent on child care activities. This reflects the different roles men and women tend to play within families and how these interact with participation in the labour force.

Couple families with children

The interaction between paid work and household work is particularly relevant for couple families with children. In many such families, mothers vary their participation in paid work and the time they devote to household work depending on their family situation and preferences, while the amount of time fathers spend on paid work and household work remains relatively constant.

In 2006, the most common arrangement among couple families with children under 15 years was for the father to be employed full-time and the mother part-time (42%). In these families, on average, mothers spent more than twice as long on household work as fathers. However, when total work (household work and paid work) is considered, there is little difference in the amount of work men and women in these families do (around 73 hours for men and 70 hours for women).

It was not very common for both parents to work full-time in families with children aged

Couple families with children aged under 15 years — 2006

	Proportion of couple families	Males			Females		
		Paid work(a) %	Household work(a)	Total work(a)	Paid work(a)	Household work(a)	Total work(a)
Male partner employed full-time							
Female partner not employed	24.4	52:30	19:57	72:27	*0:29	65:13	65:41
Female partner employed part-time	41.5	51:27	21:21	72:48	19:29	50:24	69:53
Female partner employed full-time	21.3	52:23	20:32	72:55	32:26	41:32	73:58

* Estimate has a relative standard error of 25% to 50% and should be used with caution

(a) Average hours and minutes per week by all persons for primary activities

Source: 2006 Time Use Survey

under 5 years. It is more common for both parents to work full-time when children are older and the demands of child care and some domestic activities may have eased. Mothers in families where both parents worked full-time spent considerably less time on household work, particularly cooking, cleaning, and laundry, compared with families in which the mother worked part-time.

While mothers who worked full-time did almost nine hours less household work a week on average than those working part-time, this did not offset the additional time they spent in paid work. The increased workload of mothers working full-time appears to come at the expense of recreation and leisure time.

Arrangements where the father worked full-time and the mother was not employed were more common in families with very young children (i.e. aged 0–4 years). Mothers in families with these working arrangements did more than three times as much household work as fathers. However, when considering total workload, fathers in these families spent more time in a combination of paid work and household work than mothers (72 hours compared with 66 hours).

Mothers in these families tended to spend much more time on household work, particularly childcare, than those in families where the mother was employed. When paid work is taken into account, mothers who were not employed spent less time working overall (66 hours) than mothers employed part-time (70 hours) or mothers employed full-time (74 hours).

Conclusion

The past few decades in Australia have seen significant change in social expectations about gender roles. This has been reflected in women playing an increasing role in the paid work force, and in men becoming more involved in child care activities. While women still do the majority of household work, men continue to do the majority of paid work. The amount of total work (paid and unpaid work) done is much the same for men and women.

The extent to which the traditional division of labour between men and women persists in the future will likely be influenced by a range of factors, including institutional arrangements, economic conditions, social expectations and ultimately by the decisions individuals and families make based on their own circumstances and preferences.

Endnotes

- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics 1997, *Unpaid work and the Australian economy, 1997*, cat. no. 5240.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 2 When taking both primary and secondary activities into account, women's average total workload in 2006 was 58 hours a week, compared with 54 hours and 20 minutes for men.
- 3 For further detail about coding changes between the 1992 and 2006 Time Use Surveys, see Australian Bureau of Statistics 2006, *How Australians use their time, 2006*, cat. no. 4153.0, ABS, Canberra.
- 4 This is consistent with findings from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics (HILDA) survey. See Baxter, J 2006, *Patterns of time use over the lifecycle: What we know and what we need to know*. Paper presented at the Social Policy Research Centre Time use and Gender Seminar, 14 June 2006. Viewed 20 February 2008, <<http://www.sprc.unsw.edu.au/Time%20Use%20and%20Gender%20Seminar/Baxter.pdf>>.
- 5 Craig, L 2006, 'Children and the revolution: A time-diary analysis of the impact of motherhood on daily workload', *Journal of Sociology*, 42 (2), pp. 125–143.