The Changing Pattern of Conjugal Roles

This Factsheet will focus on:
- how conjugal roles have changed over time
- the explanations for the changing pattern of conjugal roles

What are conjugal roles?
The roles played by a husband and wife within a marriage.
Conjugal roles relate to role relationships between spouses where domestic tasks and childcare are shared. The role of men and women in the house has changed in recent years.

Elizabeth Bott (1957) one of the first sociologists to study the relationships in the home, identified two types of conjugal roles:

- **Segregated conjugal roles** – These exist when husbands and wives lead largely separate social lives and have sharply differentiated roles within the family. This type of family is known as the asymmetrical family.
- **Joint conjugal roles** – these are characterised by more sharing of responsibilities, decision making and leisure activities. Husbands' and wives' roles are less sharply differentiated. This type of family is known as the symmetrical family.

Who does what?
Division of household tasks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Allocation of tasks %</th>
<th>1983</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>2004</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mainly men</td>
<td>Mainly women</td>
<td>Shared equally</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Household shopping</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Makes evening meal</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does evening dishes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does household cleaning</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does washing and ironing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Repairs household equipment</td>
<td>82</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organises household money and bills</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Looks after sick children</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teaches children discipline</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The distribution re household tasks has changed slightly over time with more household jobs being equally shared. However, women still continue to do most jobs around the house.
The Mintel Housework Survey 2004 showed the following:

Housework:
6% of men do no housework; 42% did "a little". 81% of women spent "a lot" or "a fair amount" of time cleaning compared to 52% of men.
75% of men and 83% of women said they cared about household cleanliness.
70% of women and 47% of men found housework enjoyable.

Paid employment
High income earners did less housework than their lower income counterparts (mainly because they paid others to do it - 14% of those earning over £36,000, compared with the average of 6% for lower earners). Women still do the majority of the household chores, despite their increased participation in the labour market.

Women spend nearly 3 hours a day on average on housework (excluding shopping and childcare). This compares with the one hour 40 minutes spent by men. Women also spend more time than men looking after children. Men, on the other hand, work or study for an average of nearly 2 hours a day more than women (4 hours 20 minutes a day compared with 2 hours 30 minutes for women).

Women were also much more likely than men to say they 'like' most household tasks. The main exception is DIY repair. Of those who say they do this activity, three in five men but only two in five women say they like it. Ironing clothes is the least popular activity among both sexes. Around half of both men and women who do this activity say they dislike it.

Two in five men do not do the ironing and a similar proportion do not do the laundry, while the proportion of women who do not do these tasks is fewer than one in 12 women. The situation is reversed when it comes to DIY. Nearly half of women say that they do not do DIY repair work, compared with 16 per cent of men. However, roles are much more equal in both decorating and gardening.

Activity
Using the information from the table above and the Mintel Housework Survey, summarise, in your own words, the changing patterns in conjugal roles since 1983.

In many societies, family life is organised around gender roles. Responsibilities within the family are allocated to members according to their sex. Some researchers have argued that there are certain tasks which are universally allocated to either males or females. They see this division of labour as reflecting biological differences between the sexes. Others see it as based on cultural assumptions about the role and abilities of each sex.

Exam Hint:- You will need to show evidence in your exam answers. Make sure you can use the most appropriate evidence to support what you are writing

Talcott Parsons (a functionalist) suggested that within the modern nuclear family it is essential that one parent, usually the father, provides the instrumental role of leader and provider while the mother performed the expressive role of giving psychological support and taking responsibility for the children. However, Parson's was referring to American society in the 1950s.

Other sociologists, such as Willmott and Young have seen the gradual breakdown in the separation of roles of husbands and wives.

Willmott and Young's research 'The Symmetrical Family' (1975) indicates how the family has developed through three stages (March of Progress - evolutionary theory.)

Stage 1: The pre-industrial family
The family at this stage was organised around its economic function as a production unit. Family members worked together in agriculture and in cottage industries. Home and work were not separated.

Stage 2: The early industrial family
The industrial revolution disrupted the unity of the family as its economic function was taken over by large scale industry. Men were out of the home working in industrial employment while the home became defined as the women's sphere. Domestic jobs were segregated.

Stage 3: The privatised nuclear family
This type of family emerged first in the middle class but gradually spread to much of the working class during the 20th century. It has three main characteristics:
- It is home centred and privatised
- The family is nuclear
- It is symmetrical with the roles of husband and wife less segregated than in stage 2. Husbands play a greater part in domestic life.

There are many reasons for the changing pattern of conjugal roles

Social Class
Bott investigated the factors which influenced the way couples organised their roles in marriage. She found no clear association between social class and conjugal roles. However, she did find that the kind of social networks couples were involved in was important. Couples who were part of a close knit social network (e.g. traditional working class families) tended to have segregated conjugal roles. In these cases, each partner would have their own network of relatives, friends and neighbours who they might have known all their lives. The relationship between husband and wife was only one amongst many and husband and wife were less socially dependent on each other.

Couples who had more loose social networks, e.g. those who had moved to a new area tended to have more joint conjugal roles. This type of couple tended to rely on each other more for support and leisure, spent more time together and shared domestic responsibilities.

Ann Oakley's study 'The sociology of housework' 1974 was based on a sample of 40 housewives, 6 of whom worked outside the home. She found that middle class husbands gave more help than working class husbands and that both gave more help with childcare than with housework.

Labour market
There was a rapid increase in female labour force participation in the 1970's. Women were no longer staying at home to fulfil the 'housewife' role but were being employed outside the home. Research by Martin and Roberts in their survey 'Women and Employment' 1984, based on a sample of 6000 women aged 16 to 59, found that men were more likely to take an active role in housework and childcare if their wives had a paid job.
Fiona Devine 1992 studied car workers’ families in Luton and found an increasing proportion of women worked part time, often resulting in a greater involvement by men in childcare and to a lesser extent housework. However, she suggests that men’s involvement was due to financial necessity rather than a desire for greater involvement in family responsibilities. She concluded that conjugal roles were, for the most part, segregated.

‘Above all, women remain responsible for child care and housework and their husband help them’

Even studies of families where the male wage earner is unemployed show traditional roles persist and even strengthened. McKee and Bell 1986 suggested that men’s masculinity is threatened by losing a job and that wives are unwilling to threaten it further by insisting that husbands take on more domestic responsibilities.

Labour saving devices
More labour saving devices – encourage men to do housework and allows women to work outside the home

The percentage of low income families without items

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Poorest fifth in 1997/98</th>
<th>Poorest fifth in 2007/08</th>
<th>Middle fifth in 2007/08</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PC</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>64%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VCR</td>
<td>49%</td>
<td>17%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Microwave</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washing machine</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Freezer</td>
<td>24%</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colour television</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This table shows that more families have labour saving devices in the home today which could influence the amount of work women do outside the home and may influence the amount of work men do inside the home.

Female dependency
The changes in the roles within the family have been influenced by the changing economic dependence of women and children on men. As women have been more involved in work outside the house, family roles have changed.

Family size
The average size of the family has declined in the last hundred years. In the 1860s average family size was around six or seven children. During the 1970s middle class couples began to limit their family size and this trend was followed by working class families after the second world war. Since the 1930s average family sizes have fluctuated between two and three children. In 1971 the average number of children per family was 2 and by 2007 this had fallen to 1.8 children per family. This change in family size allowed mothers to go out to work rather than staying at home to look after the large family. This influenced the pattern of roles within the family.

Marriage
Up until the early 1970s marriage had become increasingly popular and couples were tending to marry at a younger age. This trend has, however, reversed in the last twenty years.

In 2007 most families were still headed by a married couple (71%), although the proportion of cohabiting couple families had increased to 14%, from 9% ten years earlier.

The change in patterns of marriage influence the roles fulfilled within the home.

Life expectancy
People are living longer which means that many women have long periods ahead of them after completing their families. Therefore, many women return to paid employment in their middle years. Rising economic activity among women has been driven by a transformation in the working patterns of women with children. In the early 1970s there was a very marked difference between women with children and other women in terms of their labour market behaviour. This is much less the case now and women with dependent children are more likely to be working than not working. The most notable changes have occurred among women with children under five, 43 per cent of whom now work, compared with only a quarter in 1973.

Much of the increase in the number of women in paid work can be accounted for by the rise of part-time work (between 1971 and 1993, 93 per cent of the total increase in women’s employment was in part-time work). Office for National Statistics findings show that in 1971 the UK employment rate for women was 56 percent compared with 70 percent by the end of 2008.

This compares with a similar decrease in men’s employment rate for the same period, with UK male employment falling from 92 percent to 78 percent. In 2008, more than 12.5 million working age women in the UK were in paid formal employment, with 40 percent working part-time compared to around 11 per cent of working men.

This change in employment patterns influenced the distribution of roles within the home.

Patriarchy
Feminists believe that women will still do most of the housework and the least desirable jobs with the lowest status because of the way society is structured. In a patriarchal society, men will always have more power and the woman will always be the one who is ‘expected’ to take time off work to care for sick children.

Exam Hint:
You need to develop a questioning approach to any information/research you read. Some things to think about:
- When was the study conducted?
- Where was the study conducted?
- Who conducted the study (approach, gender etc)?
- What does the study say about the topic?
- What does it not say about the topic?
Answers to these types of questions will form the basis of your evaluation in exam answers.
Problems with the domestic division of labour approach

There are many criticisms directed towards studies of the allocation of tasks in the home.

1. The tasks chosen can influence the picture given e.g. focusing on activities like cooking and cleaning tend to produce a picture that women do most of the work. However, an analysis of a broader range of activities e.g. cleaning the car, mowing the garden might reveal that men do more work. Willmott and Young, for example, added together the number of hours husband and wives spent on both domestic work and paid work and found that although men did less in the home their hours of paid work were longer.

2. Analysing contributions in terms of time can be misleading. Wives are more likely to be ‘on call’ for long periods e.g. getting up for children in the night.

3. A simple analysis of who does what in the home ignores the satisfaction provided by different tasks.

Jobs About The House
Household chores still women’s work?

Attitudes to household chores, 2000-01, United Kingdom, Percentages

How to use this information to answer exam questions

You need to use the information in this Factsheet to develop an argument about whether conjugal roles really have changed.

Add your own points to this summary

Summary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Roles are changing</th>
<th>Role are not changing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>More men taking an active part in housework (statistics)</td>
<td>Women still doing most of the housework (statistics)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More labour saving devices – encourage men to do housework and allows women to work outside the home</td>
<td>More women in the labour market but still do the housework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More entertainment in the home – more home-centred</td>
<td>Triple shift</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More women working outside the home</td>
<td>Women still do more housework if they work and the man is unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Changing ideas of masculinity – new man</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Example exam questions

Identify and briefly explain two possible reasons for the rise of the symmetrical family

You would gain marks here for the identification and explanation of two possible reasons for this rise. Your answers may include the following:

- More women working: this has meant that men have had to take on more domestic labour.
- New technology in the home: labour-saving devices have encouraged men to do more housework (or: home entertainment technology has made home a more attractive place for couples to spend their leisure in toether).
- Geographical mobility/new housing developments: these have helped to break up traditional networks of extended kin and workmates, thus promoting the privatised nuclear family.
- Changing ideas of masculinity: the emergence of the new man. as a cultural norm has meant men are now more willing to perform domestic labour/childcare.

Assess the extent to which husbands and wives now have a relationship based on equality.

In order to reach the top mark band you will need to show sound, detailed knowledge and understanding of sociological material on conjugal relationships.

You could include the following:

- domestic labour,
- the triple shift;
- the symmetrical family;
- joint and segregated conjugal roles;
- paid employment

You will also need to show analysis and evaluation which is explicit and relevant with use of appropriate research to support your arguments.
Test yourself
1. When husband and wife share household tasks this is known as

2. When husband and wife do not share household tasks this is known as

3. Identify and describe three features of the symmetrical family

4. Briefly explain how conjugal roles have changed over time

5. Identify and explain three reasons for the patterns of change of conjugal roles