

# Gender roles

## An incomplete revolution?

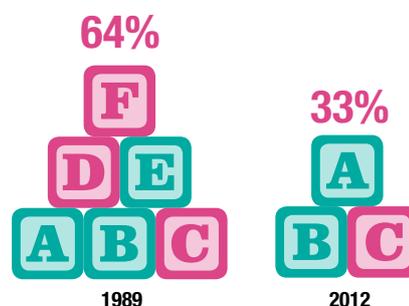
Female participation in the labour market has increased markedly over the past 30 years. Both men and women in Britain's couple families now tend to work, albeit with women often working part-time when children are young. Has this change been accompanied by a decline in support for a traditional division of gender roles in the home and workplace? And has women's involvement in unpaid labour within the home declined at the same time as their participation in the labour market has risen?

### Attitudes to gender roles

Support for a traditional division of gender roles has declined over time, though substantial support remains for women having the primary caring role when children are young.



In the mid-1980s, close to half the public agreed "a man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family". Just 13% subscribe to this view now. This decline is primarily a result of generational replacement, with consecutive generations being less supportive of **traditional gender roles**.



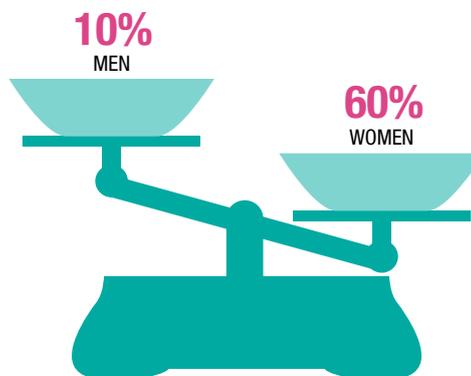
**33% think a mother should stay at home** when there is a child under school age, compared with 64% in 1989. The most popular choice now is for the mother to work part time (26% in 1989, 43% now).

### Household work

Yet, as in the early 1990s, women still undertake a disproportionate amount of unpaid labour within the home and are much more likely to view their contribution as being unfair.



Women report spending an average of 13 hours on **housework** and 23 hours on **caring for family members** each week; the equivalent figures for men are 8 hours and 10 hours.



Both sexes view their relative contributions as unfair; 60% of women report doing more than their **fair share** (compared with just 10% of men), while 37% of men report doing less than their fair share (compared with just 6% of women).

## Introduction

### Authors

#### Jacqueline Scott and Elizabeth Clery

Jacqueline Scott is Professor of Empirical Sociology at the University of Cambridge. Elizabeth Clery is Research Director at NatCen Social Research and a Co-Director of the British Social Attitudes survey series

Families in contemporary society are becoming more individualised. The so-called nuclear family norm of a married heterosexual couple bringing up their children, with a traditional gender division of labour, is increasingly under challenge. There has been a rise in women's participation in the labour market over the past few decades and, in today's couple families, the tendency is for both partners to work. However, women, especially those with young children, still disproportionately work part-time, and they still do the bulk of unpaid care. So, this suggests that, at least as yet, we have not seen a so-called 'gender role revolution' (Esping-Andersen, 2009).

In this chapter, we ask whether there is evidence that the increase we have seen in women's labour market participation is coupled with a more widespread shift in perceptions about gender roles. In other words, we report how far a gender role revolution has been evolving in Britain in the last 30 years, and whether it seems set to continue to progress or whether it has now run its course. Firstly, using questions fielded on British Social Attitudes since 1984, we chart changes in public attitudes to mothers playing a dual role in paid work and raising children, and what is seen as the appropriate division of labour in this respect between mothers and fathers. And we take a closer look, with new questions fielded in 2012, at how people think couple families should divide their work and familial responsibilities. By looking at generational change in attitudes, we try to unpick what is driving or hindering change towards greater gender egalitarianism.



**While the male breadwinner family system has been in decline for at least half a century, concerns about 'work-family conflict' have only been voiced more recently**

Secondly, we report on what couples say about their *own* division of labour within the household – who does what at home – to see the extent to which things have changed over the past 30 years. While the male breadwinner family system has been in decline for at least half a century, concerns about 'work-family conflict' have only been voiced more recently. Some argue that the only way that family conflicts associated with women's labour market participation can be avoided is if men take on more of the housework and childcare (Witherspoon and Prior, 1991; Lewis et al., 2008; Himmelweit, 2010). So, in 2012, are men doing more of the household tasks than they used to, or are women still expected to do a 'second shift', adding employment to their primary responsibility for housework and family care (Hochschild, 1989)? As well as looking at what men and women do within the household, we also look at whether or not they perceive their own division of unpaid labour as fair, and whether they feel conflicted by their responsibilities at work and at home. Importantly, in addressing the question of whether there is evidence of a gender role revolution, we report on how these perceptions have changed over time.



**With the rise in mothers' labour market participation, there is a role for policy measures that seek to reduce family-work conflicts**

Certainly, with the rise in mothers' labour market participation, there is a role for policy measures that seek to reduce family-work conflicts, including childcare provision, improvement in part-time working conditions and parental leave. In the UK there was little relevant policy on such issues until the 1990s. After 1997 there was a surge in policies designed to support the 'adult-worker model', whereby mothers, including lone mothers, were encouraged to work (Lewis, 2008). From 1997 onwards steps have been taken to improve childcare provision (e.g. Sure Start was launched in 1998). However, childcare in Britain remains among the most expensive in Europe (Schober and Scott, 2012). The Part-Time Work Directive (1997) was an important advance, stipulating that part-time workers were entitled to the same benefits as full-time workers, in terms of training, pay and parental leave. In reality, parental leave provision in the UK is mainly about

maternity leave, which became a statutory right in the 1999/2001 Employment Relations and Employment Act (Williams, 2004). While paternal leave entitlement has improved somewhat since it was first introduced in 2003, it remains the case that few families can afford to take it up, as income loss is often prohibitive. Even so largely symbolic policies – like the notion of shared parental leave – do matter, because they encourage fathers to get more involved in the care of infants.

It is questionable as to how far the public will endorse policies that are costly at a time of economic crisis, when the country has to restrict public expenditure. We conclude the chapter by examining current attitudes to parental leave when a new child is born. Does the public favour policy measures which promote a greater merging of gender roles in the home and workplace, or do preferences reflect the status quo? These are big issues which get to the heart of questions about how far the state should be involved in shaping family life, gender equality, and parental rights and responsibilities.

Our chapter builds on a wealth of literature about family and gender role change, providing an up-to-date picture of Britain today. Given some suggestion of a more recent retreat from gender egalitarianism because of concerns voiced about potential conflicts between maternal employment and family wellbeing, especially for families with young children (Scott, 2010), we look for any changes to earlier findings about public support for mothers' dual paid work and family roles (Witherspoon and Prior, 1991; Scott et al., 1996).

## Participation in the labour market

Changes in women's participation in the labour market over the past 30 years give important context to our later findings on the general attitudes of the public and the personal views of couples about their own circumstances. Behavioural and attitudinal changes often flow in both directions. Thus, more women enter employment as female participation is viewed as more acceptable, and more acceptance follows in the wake of women's increased labour market participation.

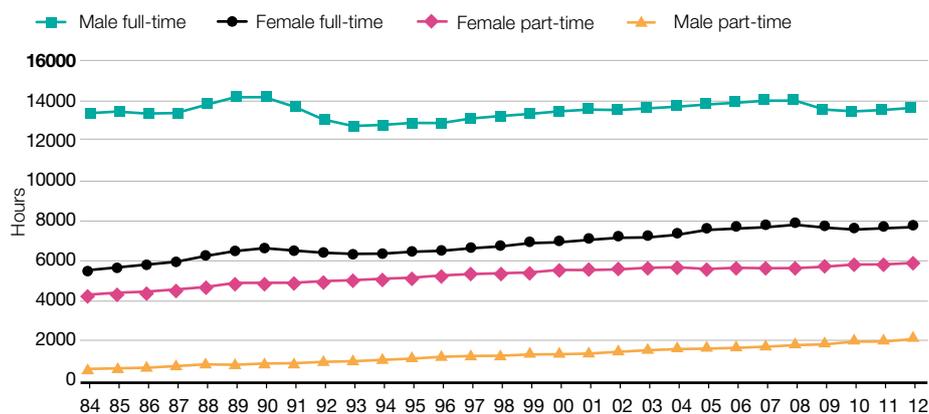
Since the early 1980s (when our British Social Attitudes questions on gender roles were first asked), there has been substantial change in the extent and ways in which women have participated within the British labour market. In Figure 5.1 we present data from the Office for National Statistics' Labour Force Survey to show how men and women's participation in the labour market has changed over the past three decades to 2012.



**From the mid-1990s, full-time employment for both women and men continued to grow steadily and the gap between men and women's employment is narrowing**

From the mid-1990s, full-time employment for both women and men continued to grow steadily and the gap between men and women's employment is narrowing. The dip for men in the 1980s and early 1990s partly reflects an increasing number of men over 55 taking early retirement (Guillemard, 1989). More recently from 2009 onwards, the dip in both men's and women's full-time employment is associated with the global economic crisis. (The rise in the relatively small numbers of men in part-time employment reflects, in part, increased numbers in higher education, with students supplementing grants with part-time jobs). For women, the growth in full-time employment from the mid-1990s onwards was stronger than the growth in part-time employment. As part-time work is often used by women – and mothers in particular – to juggle family and work responsibilities, it is worth looking more closely at the statistics associated with the work-patterns of women, with and without dependent children.

**Figure 5.1 Trends in employment by hours worked and sex, Great Britain 1984–2012**



Data show the number of people aged 16–64 in employment divided by the population aged 16–64. Data are seasonally adjusted

Source: Labour Force Survey, data available at: [www.ons.gov.uk/ons/datasets-and-tables/index.html](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/datasets-and-tables/index.html)  
The data on which Figure 5.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter



**In 2010, a higher proportion of mothers still worked part-time (37 per cent) rather than full-time (29 per cent), sharing their time between work and looking after the family**

Women's participation in paid employment has been encouraged by UK and EU policies aimed at reducing barriers to work caused by conflicting work and family life responsibilities (Lewis, 2012). Such policies have gone hand-in-hand with a marked increase in the proportion of mothers in the labour force and a narrowing in the gap between the employment rates of women with and without dependent children such that, in 2010, there was less than one percentage point difference in the participation rates of mothers (66.5 per cent) and women without dependent children (67.3 per cent) (Office for National Statistics, 2011). In 2010, a higher proportion of mothers still worked part-time (37 per cent) rather than full-time (29 per cent), sharing their time between work and looking after the family.

Our chapter focuses on the division of labour within couple families. For mothers in couple families, where there are increased opportunities to share childcare responsibilities, employment rates were higher (72 per cent in 2010) than for mothers in single-parent families (55 per cent) (Office for National Statistics, 2011). And, unsurprisingly, the Labour Force Survey statistics also show that, as the age of the youngest child in the family increases, so does the proportion of mothers in work.

## Attitudes to gender roles: change over time

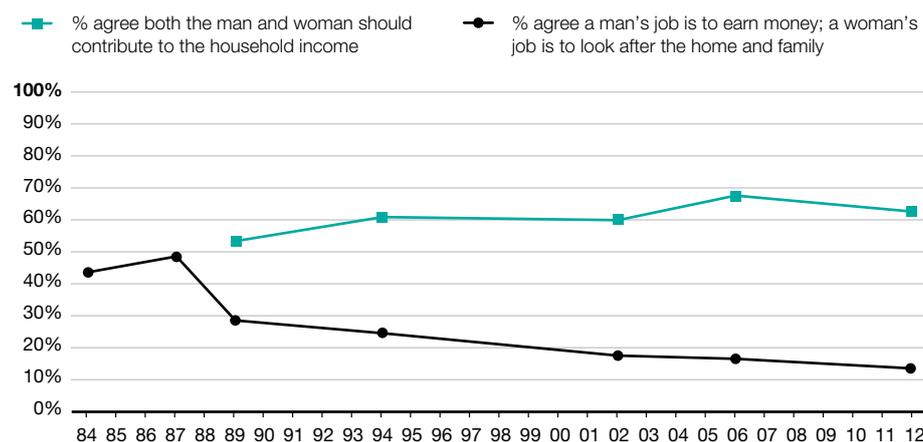
Periodically since the mid-1980s, British Social Attitudes surveys have included attitudinal questions asking about the roles of men and women within the family, in particular around providing an income from work versus playing a caring role in the home. Tracking responses to these questions over the past three decades, we report on whether, in line with women's increased participation in the labour market, there have also been changes in what the public believes men's and women's roles should be. Have we reached a point where the public thinks that men and women should have equal roles in the workplace and at home? Or is there still a perception that there should be a gender divide?

Figure 5.2 shows the percentage of people who agree to each of the following two statements about the gender division of responsibilities around providing an income versus looking after the home:

*A man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family*[1]

*Both the man and woman should contribute to the household income*

**Figure 5.2 Attitudes to gender division of responsibilities, 1984–2012**



The data on which Figure 5.2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

**In the mid-1980s, close to half (43 per cent in 1984 and 48 per cent in 1987) of people supported a gendered separation of roles**

In the mid-1980s, close to half (43 per cent in 1984 and 48 per cent in 1987) of people supported a gendered separation of roles, with the man in the ‘breadwinner’ role and the woman in the caring role. Clearly, at that time, there was a strong belief in the traditional gender divide. Since then, there has been a steady decline in the numbers holding this view. In 2012, only 13 per cent of people – or one person in eight – thinks that this should be the case. So, in respect of whether women should stay at home rather than take on paid work, there has been a dramatic shift in attitudes to gender roles in the past 30 years.

**There is considerable support for both men and women contributing to the household income**

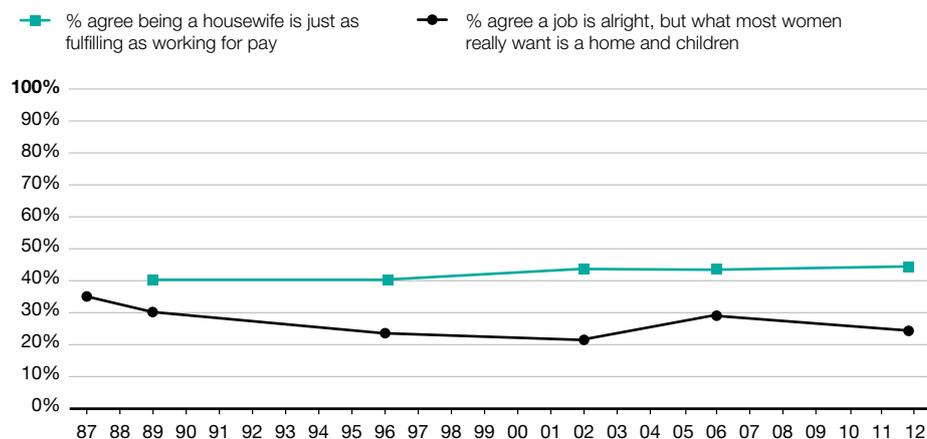
The second measure, asking whether men and women should both contribute to the household income, has been asked in British Social Attitudes since 1989, when half (53 per cent) of the public agreed this should be the case. In 2012, the proportion agreeing has risen to 62 per cent (with some fluctuations in the intervening period). So, while few people now support the idea that there should necessarily be a clear gender division of labour, with men working outside and women working inside the home, there is considerable support for both men and women contributing to the household income.

Figure 5.3 shows the responses over time to two further statements which explore whether the ‘caring’ role ascribed to women is one which people think reflects women’s own preferences and experiences:

*A job is alright, but what most women really want is a home and children*

*Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay*

**Figure 5.3 Perceptions of women’s preferences for roles as carer and earner, 1987–2012**



The data on which Figure 5.3 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

**People’s attitudes on the appropriate gender division between men and women may relate to their views about whether mothers’ employment is detrimental for family life and for children**

In 1987, a third (36 per cent) of the public thought that most women would prioritise their caring role over having a job. That proportion has dropped to a quarter (26 per cent) in 2012. There has been very little change (from 41 per cent in 1989 to 45 per cent in 2012) in the proportion of people believing that the role of the housewife is just as fulfilling as the role of worker. The answers indicate more limited change in the public’s perceptions of how women regard and experience a ‘caring’ role in practice, compared to the substantial change we saw in relation to abstract perceptions of what male and female roles *should* be.

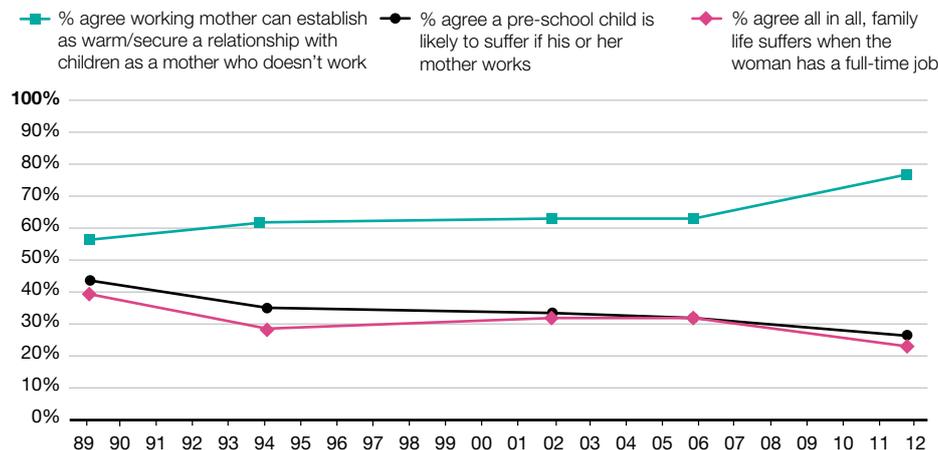
People’s attitudes on the appropriate gender division between men and women may relate to their views about whether mothers’ employment is detrimental for family life and for children. We know about public perceptions of this issue by their responses to the following statements:

*A working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work*

*A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works*

*All in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job*

**Figure 5.4 Views on impact of maternal employment on family and children, 1989–2012**



The data on which Figure 5.4 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter



**There has been a clear decline since 1989 in the proportion of people who perceive a woman’s adoption of a ‘breadwinner’ role as damaging for her family**

On each measure, there has been a clear decline since the questions were first asked in 1989 in the proportion of people who perceive a woman’s adoption of a ‘breadwinner’ role (by having a paid job) as damaging for her children and family. However, it is still evident among a minority, particularly when children of pre-school age are involved. In 1989, six in ten (58 per cent) people agreed that a working mother can establish as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work, but almost three in ten (28 per cent) disagreed. By 2012, almost eight in ten (77 per cent) subscribe to this view, with only one in ten (11 per cent) disagreeing. Similarly, there have been drops in the proportion of people thinking that pre-school children suffer if their mother works (from 46 per cent in 1989 to 30 per cent in 2012), and in the proportion of people expressing the view that family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job (from 42 per cent in 1989 to 27 per cent now).

So, it seems that while attitudes that there should be a clear gender divide – with male breadwinners and female home-keepers – have been almost eradicated (believed by only one in eight people in 2012), when children are involved, substantial minorities of the public still believe that women would prefer to, and indeed should, stay at home rather than take on paid work.

In addition to the measures of how far the public agrees to the statements above, British Social Attitudes has included the following question, asked in relation firstly to when there is a child under school age, and secondly to when their youngest child has started school:

*Do you think that women should work outside the home full-time, part-time or not at all under the following circumstances?*

We look at people’s responses to these two questions to explore further how people’s attitudes on women working are influenced by the age of their children – and whether these attitudes have shifted over the past two decades, since the questions were first asked in 1989.

**Table 5.1 Attitudes to mothers’ employment, in different circumstances, 1989, 2002 and 2012**

% agree that a woman should	When there is a child under school age			When the youngest child has started school		
	1989	2002	2012	1989	2002	2012
Work full-time	2	3	5	13	15	28
Work part-time	26	34	43	68	66	52
Stay at home	64	48	33	11	5	2
Can’t choose	6	12	17	7	12	16
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>1274</i>	<i>1984</i>	<i>953</i>	<i>1274</i>	<i>1984</i>	<i>953</i>
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1307</i>	<i>1960</i>	<i>950</i>	<i>1307</i>	<i>1960</i>	<i>950</i>



**There has been a substantial shift in people’s views, particularly about mothers working while their children are under school age**

Since 1989, there has been a substantial shift in people’s views, particularly about mothers working while their children are under school age. Here, the major shift has been between thinking that mothers should stay at home and thinking they should work part-time. In 1989, two-thirds of the public thought a mother should stay at home with pre-school children; by 2012, the proportion thinking this had dropped to a third. Over the same period, the proportion thinking she should work

part-time rose from 26 per cent to 43 per cent. While support remains rare for the idea that a mother with a child below school-age should work full-time, it has doubled from two per cent in 1989 to five per cent in 2012.

In terms of views about a mother whose children are all of school age, support for her staying at home or working part-time has dropped since 1989, while the proportion holding the view that she should work full-time has increased – from 13 per cent in 1989 to 28 per cent in 2012. Working part-time remains the most popular option (cited by 52 per cent in 2012), although support for this is less pronounced now than it was in 1989 (when 68 per cent agreed a woman with children of school age should work part-time). Interestingly, uncertainty has risen in relation to both circumstances (from six and seven per cent in 1989 to 17 and 16 per cent now) – perhaps resulting from the fact that mothers’ actual behaviour is more diverse now than it has been in the past.

### A generational shift in attitudes?

In order to reflect on whether we are likely to see a further erosion of traditional values, and further progression of the ‘gender role revolution’, it is helpful to understand whether the trends in societal attitudes we report above are the result of generational change – with more ‘traditional’ generations being replaced by less ‘traditional’ ones as time goes on. If that is the case, we might expect to see a continued decline in support for traditional gender divides into the future.

To look at this, we focus on the proportion of the public who agree with the statement that “A man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the home and family” – a view which most clearly encapsulates a traditional division of gender roles. We first look at variations in the responses of people in different age groups. Because there is very little difference in the views of men and women on this issue, either in 1984 (when 45 per cent of men and 41 per cent of women agreed with the statement) or in 2012 (when levels of agreement were 13 per cent and 12 per cent respectively), we do not separate our analysis by sex.



**In 2012, support for a traditional division of labour is much more pronounced among older people and least popular among the youngest age groups**

**Table 5.2 Attitudes to gender roles, by age**

	Age						
	18–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56–65	66+	All
<b>A man’s job is to earn money; a woman’s job is to look after the home and family</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree	4	13	9	6	12	28	13
Neither agree nor disagree	13	13	19	26	21	28	21
Disagree	82	73	71	65	64	40	65
<i>Weighted base</i>	107	164	177	168	155	180	953
<i>Unweighted base</i>	63	129	173	153	172	259	950

Table 5.2 shows that, in 2012, support for a traditional division of labour is much more pronounced among older people (those aged 66 years and over) and least popular among the youngest age groups. Less than one in 20 of those aged

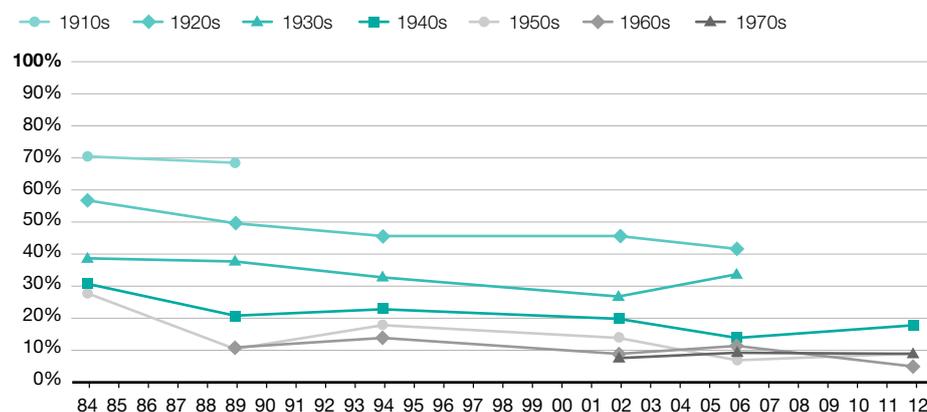
25 years and under and around one in ten of those aged 26–35 agree with a traditional division of gender roles, compared to three in ten of those aged 66 and over. More markedly, around three-quarters of those in the youngest two age groups disagree with a traditional division of gender roles, compared to just four in ten of those in the oldest age group. On the face of it, this might suggest that decreasing support for a traditional gender divide is due to ‘generation replacement’, with older generations, more likely to be supportive of traditional gender roles, dying out and being replaced by younger, less traditional, generations.



**While we might expect to see further reductions in support for a traditional division of labour in coming decades, the speed of change in attitudes may slow down**

To explore this theory further, we looked at the responses over time of different age cohorts. So, in each survey year, we divided the respondents into people born in particular decades (those born between 1910 and 1929, between 1920 and 1939, and so on). In this way, in Figure 5.5, we can see the differences in the attitudes of particular age cohorts, and how these change over time. Within each cohort, with the exception of those born in the 1970s (and most notably among those born in the 1940s and 1950s) there is some decline over time in support for a traditional division of gender roles, suggesting that people are to some extent influenced by changing societal norms. However, the overriding story here is one of generational replacement, with each successive age cohort – or generation – being less likely to support a traditional division of gender roles, compared to the one that preceded them. The gap is narrowing between the differences of the most recent cohorts. This implies that, while we might expect to see further reductions in support for a traditional division of labour in coming decades, the speed of change in attitudes may slow down.

**Figure 5.5 Agreement with a traditional division of gender roles (man’s job to earn money; woman’s job to look after home and family), by generation, 1984–2012**



*The data on which Figure 5.5 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter  
Data are only presented for those generation cohorts with an unweighted base of at least 100 in a given year*

## How should parents divide their work and caring responsibilities when children are young?

The questions we report above about how much mothers should work when their children are pre-school or school-age focus on the mother’s employment alone, without regard to the working patterns of the father. It may be that responses are based on an (unstated) assumption that the father would be working full-time. If so, people’s views might be somewhat different if this

was not necessarily the case. To explore this issue, British Social Attitudes included a new question in 2012 tapping public perceptions of 'ideal' divisions of parental responsibility between employment and childcare. Specifically, the question asked:

*Consider a family with a child under school age. What, in your opinion, is the best way for them to organise their family and work life?*

*And, in your opinion, which of these options would be the least desirable?*

Respondents were presented with a range of options, set out in Table 5.3. It is striking that, in 2012, only one in ten (nine per cent) people choose options that did not involve the mother being ascribed the sole or main 'carer' role. The most popular approach, selected by almost four in ten people, is for the mother to work part-time and the father to work full-time. Three in ten think the mother should stay at home while the father works full-time. There is minimal support for a role reversal: less than one per cent think that the father should stay at home or work part-time while the mother works full-time. Likewise, very few people (four per cent) think that it is best for both parents to work full-time: there is clear opposition to this, with almost half (47 per cent) viewing this as the least desirable way of organising things. There is also minimal support for splitting the breadwinner and carer roles equally (with both parents working part-time). So, these data suggest that the public retains a view that there should be a gender divide in terms of caring responsibilities: the shift has been in accepting the idea that a mother works part-time, rather than not at all.



**The most popular approach, selected by almost four in ten people, is for the mother to work part-time and the father to work full-time**

**Table 5.3 Best and least desirable way for family with child under school age to organise family and work life, by sex**

	Best way			Least desirable		
	Men	Women	All	Men	Women	All
	%	%	%	%	%	%
The mother stays at home and the father works full-time	35	27	31	6	8	7
The mother works part-time and the father works full-time	36	41	38	4	4	4
Both the mother and the father work full-time	5	4	4	46	48	47
Both the mother and the father work part-time	4	6	5	5	4	4
The father works part-time and the mother works full-time	–	–	–	3	2	3
The father stays at home and the mother works full-time	–	*	*	13	9	11
Can't choose	19	19	19	21	22	22
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>507</i>	<i>446</i>	<i>953</i>	<i>507</i>	<i>446</i>	<i>953</i>
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>438</i>	<i>512</i>	<i>950</i>	<i>438</i>	<i>512</i>	<i>950</i>

The views of men and women on this issue are very similar: it is not the case that men express substantially greater support for options involving a traditional division of labour roles, or indeed that they would advocate a greater care-giving role for fathers. Moreover, the views of parents reflect those of the population as a whole, while the views of mothers and fathers of children aged under 18 are not significantly different.



**People aged 66 and over – who were mostly born during or before World War Two – show the strongest support for the ‘male breadwinner’**

We have shown earlier that older people tend to be more supportive than younger people of traditional gender roles. We might therefore expect them to be more likely to advocate a traditional arrangement here, where the mother stays at home while the father works full-time. Table 5.4 shows this is the case. People aged 66 and over – who were mostly born during or before World War Two – show the strongest support for the ‘male breadwinner’ – with almost half (48 per cent) recommending the mother stays at home and the father works full time. This generation is also the least likely to select the “can’t choose” option. When this generation had dependent-aged children, they would have taken traditional gender roles for granted (although economic necessity forced some women to work part-time); whereas for subsequent generations the male breadwinner family is only one option among several different ways that families with young children can choose to organise the divide of work and care.

**Table 5.4 Most desirable way for family with child under school age to organise work and family life, by age**

	Age						All
	18–25	26–35	36–45	46–55	56–65	66+	
<b>% agreeing best way for family with child under school age to organise their family and work life</b>							
Male breadwinner	27	22	24	31	32	48	31
Modified breadwinner	37	37	44	38	39	34	38
Dual earner	–	6	6	6	4	3	4
Both part-time	14	6	4	2	5	2	5
Can’t choose	21	23	21	22	17	10	19
<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>107</i>	<i>164</i>	<i>177</i>	<i>168</i>	<i>155</i>	<i>180</i>	<i>953</i>
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>63</i>	<i>129</i>	<i>173</i>	<i>153</i>	<i>172</i>	<i>259</i>	<i>950</i>

*Male breadwinner – the mother stays at home father works full time*

*Modified breadwinner – the mother works part-time and the father works full time*

*Dual earner (full-time) – both the mother and the father works full-time*

*Both part time – both the mother and the father works part-time*

The youngest age group (aged 25 or less) are by far the most likely to favour both the mother and father working part-time (although, still, just 14 per cent of young adults favour this option); we should treat this figure with caution due to the small number of respondents in this age group. Both parents working part-time may make possible a more egalitarian approach to parenting. However, this option would only be realistic in Britain if wider opportunities for part-time work become available across different job sectors. Moreover, behaviour is more constrained than attitudes, and whether parents would actually risk opting for part-time over full-time work in times of tough economic conditions is not something our data can answer.

Given the changes in attitudes to gender roles and labour force participation reported above, we might expect domestic labour to have also shifted away from the traditional gender division. It is to this question that we turn next.

## Attitudes have changed, but have behaviours?



**Both men and women agree that women spend much more time each week on average – both on household work and on looking after family members**

We have shown how, during the past three decades, the public has become less traditional in its views about mothers working per se, but that the majority view is that mothers, with young children at least, should still retain the primary care role (be that by staying at home or by combining part-time work with the care-giving role). At this point in the chapter, we turn to look at what people report is happening in their own households. Using questions included in British Social Attitudes since 1994 or 2002, we explore the issue of the domestic division of labour from a number of angles. First we examine how much time men and women report spending on housework and family care. Second, we examine whether particular tasks are more or less likely to be undertaken exclusively by men and women than they have been in the past. Thirdly, we look at whether or not men and women view their own gender division of domestic labour as fair. These findings add to our evidence of whether, with increasing numbers of women (and mothers) in the workplace, this has resulted in increased equity in terms of looking after the home.

In order to see how household work and caring is divided between couples, British Social Attitudes ask those living with a partner:

*On average, how many hours a week do you personally spend on household work, not including childcare and leisure time activities?*

*On average, how many hours a week do you spend looking after family members (e.g. children, elderly, ill or disabled family members)?*

Men spend an average of

**8 hours**

on housework per week, while women spend

**13 hours**

The average (mean) hours that men and women report spending on these activities in 2002 (household work only) and 2012 are shown in Table 5.5. Other studies have found that men somewhat ‘inflate’ their participation in household chores, compared with the estimates given by their partners about how much the men do (Scott and Plagnol, 2012). In this table we therefore show the hours spent by men and women, as reported by the individual themselves and by their partner. There has been little change in the gender division of unpaid work across the past decade. Both men and women agree that women spend much more time each week on average – both on household work and on looking after family members. In 2012, according to self-reports, men spend an average of eight hours on housework per week, while women spend 13 hours. The comparable figures for care of family members are 23 hours a week for women and 10 for men.

**Table 5.5 Average (mean) reported hours spent by men and women in couple on household work, 2002 and 2012**

Sex of person doing tasks	Household work		Looking after family members	
	2002	2012	2002	2012
Male (self-reported)	7.8	8.3	n/a	10.4
Male (reported by partner)	5.9	5.7	n/a	12.1
Female (self-reported)	14.0	13.3	n/a	22.7
Female (reported by partner)	15.4	14.1	n/a	15.3
<i>Men</i>				
Weighted base	527	438	527	438
Unweighted base	527	438	527	438
<i>Women</i>				
Weighted base	619	512	619	512
Unweighted base	619	512	619	512

Base: respondents who live with a partner  
n/a = not asked

When we combine self-reported involvement in household work and looking after family members, we find that men in 2012 report spending an average of 19 hours a week on these activities, compared to the 36 hours reported by women. A similar magnitude of difference is found when we consider the reported time spent by fathers and mothers specifically; while fathers report an average of 24 hours per week spent on household work and looking after family members, the comparable figure for mothers is 49 hours.

Periodically since 1994, British Social Attitudes also asked people in couple households to identify who in their household performs each of the tasks listed in Table 5.6. The table shows the percentages of people who say that each particular task is performed generally by the man or by the woman in the household (although, since 2002, the question was asked in terms of whether each task was done always/usually by themselves, their partner, or both equally, with the option of saying the task is done by someone else).

The overall story is that there has been very little change over the past two decades in the percentage of couple households dividing household responsibilities along traditional gender lines. The biggest gender divides are in who does the laundry (women, in 70 per cent of couple households in 2012) and who makes small repairs around the house (men, in 75 per cent of couple households in 2012). However, there has been some shift in responsibilities for doing the laundry since 1994, when in eight in ten households it was largely the woman's task. While the extent to which other tasks are typically undertaken by men or women is less pronounced, it was the case in 1994 and remains the case in 2012 that, to differing degrees, women are much more likely than men to always or usually care for sick family members, shop for groceries, do the household cleaning and prepare the meals. (However, both caring for sick family members and shopping are as likely to be done equally by both partners, as to be usually done by only the woman.) While women are less likely to be primarily responsible for caring for sick family members than they were decades ago, there is little evidence of a substantial increase in men undertaking this activity or it being shared.



**There has been very little change over the past two decades in the percentage of couple households dividing responsibilities along traditional gender lines**

**Table 5.6 Household tasks undertaken by men and women, 1994–2012[2]**

Individual reported as always/usually undertaking task	1994	2002	2006	2012
<b>Does the laundry</b>	%	%	%	%
Always/usually man	1	6	5	6
Both equally	18	15	17	20
Always/usually woman	79	78	74	70
<b>Makes small repairs around the house</b>	%	%	%	%
Always/usually man	75	71	73	75
Both equally	18	17	14	10
Always/usually woman	5	7	8	7
<b>Cares for sick family members</b>	%	%	%	%
Always/usually man	1	3	3	5
Both equally	45	36	44	38
Always/usually woman	48	48	43	36
<b>Shops for groceries</b>	%	%	%	%
Always/usually man	6	8	8	10
Both equally	52	45	47	43
Always/usually woman	41	45	41	44
<b>Does the household cleaning</b>	%	%	%	%
Always/usually man	n/a	5	6	8
Both equally	n/a	29	30	29
Always/usually woman	n/a	59	58	56
<b>Prepares the meals</b>	%	%	%	%
Always/usually man	n/a	11	11	16
Both equally	n/a	29	27	27
Always/usually woman	n/a	58	58	55
<i>Weighted base</i>	704	1339	1278	679
<i>Unweighted base</i>	601	1146	1147	598

*Base: respondents in heterosexual couples*

*The percentages in the table do not add up to 100 per cent because we have not shown the very few responses that say they can't choose or the task is done by someone else*

*n/a = not asked*

Knowing how couples divide their time does not tell us whether they think this is an appropriate division of labour given their other commitments (for instance, paid work). So, in 2002 and 2012, British Social Attitudes asked:

*Which of the following best applies to the sharing of household work between you and your spouse/partner?*

The answer options were framed in terms of the extent to which someone felt they were taking on a “fair share”.

## 6 in 10 women in 2002 and 2012 consider that they do more than their fair share of the household work

The views presented in Table 5.7 highlight substantial differences in the perceptions of men and women on this matter – and that these views have not changed much over the past decade. Around six in ten women in 2002 and 2012 consider that they do more than their fair share of the household work. However, only around four in ten men in both years think that they do less than their fair share. Men are unlikely to say they do more than their fair share, as are women to say that they do less than their fair share. Just under half of men and around a third of women think that they do roughly their fair share.

So, although significantly fewer men in 2012 than in 2002 report that they are doing less than their fair share, still the key finding is that, when it comes to their own division of labour within the home, most women think that the division of labour is unjust because she is doing more than her fair share. Within couple households, there is little sign of a gender role revolution in terms of who does what around the home.

**Table 5.7 Perceptions of division of household work by sex of respondent, 2002 and 2012**

	2002		2012	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
<b>Perception of fairness of housework divide by sex</b>	%	%	%	%
Much more/a bit more than my fair share	10	63	15	60
Roughly my fair share	45	31	46	31
A bit less/much less than my fair share	44	4	37	6
<i>Weighted base</i>	616	723	390	273
<i>Unweighted base</i>	527	619	311	263

*Base: respondents in heterosexual couples*

These findings are broadly replicated when we focus on the views of mothers and fathers specifically. Moreover, when we look at couple households where both members of the couple are doing a comparable amount of paid work (both full-time, both part-time or both not working) we find similar perceptions of fairness in the gender division of domestic labour – although the numbers available are too small for analysis in some instances. In couples where partners are doing the same amount of paid work, 63 per cent of women say that they are doing more than their fair share of housework, while 15 per cent of men say that this is the case for them – almost exactly replicated in the figures presented in Figure 5.7.

## Conflict between work and family life

If more women are doing paid work and they remain primarily responsible for family care and household chores, we may find that there has been an increase in the conflict between balancing work and family life. British Social Attitudes includes four questions that tap into people's perceptions of work-family conflict, by asking how often they have had four different experiences in the past three months. Two of these questions address the spillover from work to home:

*I have come home from work too tired to do the chores which need to be done*

*It has been difficult for me to fulfil my family responsibilities because of the amount of time I spent on my job*

The other two questions look at how family responsibilities can make paid work difficult:

*I have arrived at work too tired to function well because of the household work I had done*

*I have found it difficult to concentrate at work because of my family responsibilities*

The responses of working people in couple relationships are presented in Table 5.8.

Again, the key message here is that there appears to be little change in work-life conflict, for either men or women, between 2002 and 2012. This reflects the fact that, over this period, there has been little change in women's labour market participation rates and in their division of labour within the home. In 2012, as in 2002, women are more likely than men to say that they come home from work regularly (weekly or several times a month) too tired to do the household chores (52 per cent of women and 40 per cent of men in 2012). They are also significantly less likely than men to say they have found it difficult to fulfil family responsibilities (20 per cent of women and 30 per cent of men in 2012). What is striking is that neither men nor women admit to family chores or family responsibilities getting in the way of their work. In the case of arriving at work too tired to function, in 2012 two thirds of men and women say this has never happened in the last three months, with a further one in five saying it has happened only once or twice. And, on the issue of whether family responsibilities have interfered with work concentration, half of men and women say this has never happened and a further three in ten in each group say it has only happened once or twice.

Thus there is a gap between people's perceptions of how work can interfere with family life, and how people report family life interferes with work. It could be that people are wary of admitting to underperforming at work, or it could be that they feel they must prioritise work over family life. What is missing from our data, are the people for whom the conflicts proved too much and who gave up their jobs. Thus, if anything these responses might underplay the extent to which jobs can cause difficulties for family life. However there is enough evidence of tensions between work and family life to be a cause for concern.



**There appears to be little change in work-life conflict, for either men or women, between 2002 and 2012**

**Table 5.8 Reported work-life conflict, by sex, 2002 and 2012**

	2002		2012	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
<b>Come home too tired to do chores</b>	%	%	%	%
Weekly	19	23	18	24
Monthly	31	28	22	28
Once or twice	35	37	40	31
Never	11	9	14	12
<b>Time spent on job made it difficult to meet family responsibilities</b>	%	%	%	%
Weekly	7	7	11	5
Monthly	24	12	19	14
Once or twice	34	31	28	28
Never	28	41	33	43
<b>Too tired to function well at work because of housework</b>	%	%	%	%
Weekly	*	2	1	*
Monthly	3	3	5	5
Once or twice	22	20	18	21
Never	70	70	67	68
<b>Difficult to concentrate at work because of family responsibilities</b>	%	%	%	%
Weekly	1	2	2	2
Monthly	5	5	5	10
Once or twice	34	40	31	28
Never	55	45	53	53
<i>Weighted base</i>	418	459	310	229
<i>Unweighted base</i>	353	380	245	233

*Base: respondents in heterosexual couples, in paid work for at least 10 hours per week*

## Public attitudes to parental leave

In this final section, we turn to the public's views on one policy measure designed to make it easier for men and women to share breadwinner and carer roles: parental leave for parents with a newborn child – which we asked about for the first time in 2012. It is in these circumstances, where parents have young children, that we have seen the public continuing to advocate the most 'traditional' division of gender roles.

The current provision of paid leave for parents of a newborn child is set out on the government website (GOV.UK). Currently, employed mothers can take up to 52 weeks leave, of which 39 weeks has an entitlement to statutory maternity pay. The first six weeks of this is paid at 90 per cent of average weekly earnings (AWE) and the remaining 33 weeks are paid at £136.78 or 90% of their AWE, whichever is lower. Paternity leave allows only one or two weeks paid ordinary paternity leave, and up to 26 weeks of paid additional leave, but only if the mother returns to work. For many families there is a considerable financial

disincentive for the father to take paid leave. The gender pay gap means that on average men's hourly wage is higher than that of women. If the couple make a decision about how to divide up work and care in order to maximize the family income, then it is usually advantageous for the woman to take maternity leave, as the pay penalty is not as large as it would be if the man took paternity leave. Plans to introduce shared parental leave are in the pipeline, with the goal being to encourage fathers to play a more active role in care, from when the child is born. However, this is likely to be a symbolic gesture, which does little to shift maternity and paternity take-up. To be more than symbolic, statutory pay would need to be increased markedly. This is not realistic in the current economic climate.

To see what arrangements the public believes should be in place to support couples with babies, who should provide them and how they should work in practice, British Social Attitudes asks:

*Consider a couple who both work full-time and now have a newborn child. One of them stops working for some time to care for their child. Do you think there should be paid leave available and, if so, for how long?*

*And who should pay for this leave?*

*Still thinking about the same couple, if both are in a similar work situation and are eligible for paid leave, how should this paid leave period be divided between the mother and the father?*

The results are presented in Table 5.9. Most people believe that there should be some paid parental leave when a child is born: just one in ten suggest that no paid leave should be available. The majority of people think that parents should be given at least six months paid leave (33 per cent between six months and a year, 28 per cent a year, and four per cent more than a year). The majority view, among those who think that some period of leave should be provided, is that the government should pay for at least part of this leave: 16 per cent think it should be solely responsible and more than half think the responsibility should be split between government and employers. One in eight thinks it should be solely the responsibility of employers to cover parental leave.

**1 in 10**  
suggest that no paid leave  
should be available

When it comes to how paid leave should be divided between mothers and fathers, there is clear support for the mother taking all or the majority of this leave (16 per cent think she should take all the paid leave and a further 43 per cent think she should take most of it). This reflects the majority support noted earlier for mothers staying at home, or working part-time, when there is a child under school age – and confirms that this support is not simply a reflection of what is currently available in terms of policy options, but rather what people think government policy should be. However, one in five people think paid leave should be divided evenly between the mother and father. So there is limited support for the proposed policy of allowing mothers and fathers to share parental leave.

Interestingly, the views of men and women in relation to this issue are relatively similar. There is a tendency for women to support a longer period of paid leave – one year's leave is the option most frequently selected by women, while men most commonly say that less than a year's leave should be available. Men and women are relatively united in their attitudes towards who should pay for this



**There is a tendency for women to support a longer period of paid leave for a new born child – one year’s leave is the option most frequently selected by women**

leave. And, while women are slightly more in favour of sharing the “carer” role, the fact remains that just one quarter advocate the mother and father sharing the period of paid leave and none recommend the father taking the majority or all of the leave. Clearly, when it comes to caring for a child under school-age, there is much more public support for a traditional division of labour roles, among both sexes, even when policy options facilitate a more diverse range of possibilities. Nevertheless, it is interesting to note that there is much greater support among the youngest age groups for the paid leave being divided between the mother and father; 44 per cent and 26 per cent of those aged 18–25 and 26–35 respectively think that both should take half of the leave, although numbers in the youngest age group are small, so this finding should be interpreted with caution. On the other hand, just 13 per cent of those aged 66+ think the paid leave should be divided in this way, reflecting the higher levels of support for a traditional division of gender roles when it comes to childcare among the older age groups, noted previously.

**Table 5.9 Attitudes to the provision of paid leave for newborn child, by sex**

	Men	Women	All
<b>How much paid leave should be available</b>	%	%	%
None	11	8	10
Less than six months	13	7	10
At least six months but less than a year	34	32	33
One year	23	34	28
More than one year	4	4	4
Don’t know	12	11	12
<i>Weighted base</i>	507	446	953
<i>Unweighted base</i>	438	512	950
<b>Who should pay for this</b>	%	%	%
The government	17	16	16
The employer	14	15	14
Both the government and the employer	55	57	56
<b>How paid leave should be divided between mother and father</b>	%	%	%
Mother should take entire period	19	13	16
Mother should take most of period	40	46	43
Both should take half period	20	24	22
Father should take most of period	–	*	*
Father should take entire period	*	–	*
<i>Weighted base</i>	439	394	832
<i>Unweighted base</i>	369	439	808

*Base: all respondents were asked how much paid leave should be available, but only those who provided an answer other than “none” were asked the follow-up questions*

## Conclusions



**Public support for a traditional division of gender roles within the home and the workplace has declined substantially over the last three decades**

Public support for a traditional division of gender roles within the home and the workplace has declined substantially over the last three decades, a change that goes hand in hand with the marked increase in the labour force participation of women and mothers. Changes in attitudes have been driven in part by generational replacement, indicating that we might expect a continuing decline of support for the traditional gender division of labour, in the future. However, even if dual-earner households are now the norm, it is wrong to think that the gender role revolution is anywhere near complete.

Gender equality in terms of who does the bulk of the chores and who is primarily responsible for looking after the children has made very little progress in terms of what happens in people's homes. Men's uptake of unpaid domestic work is slow, and women continue to feel that they are doing more than their fair share. Whether women's 'double shift' – both doing a paid job and the bulk of family care and housework chores – is sustainable is an important question for the future.



**Men's uptake of unpaid domestic work is slow, and women continue to feel that they are doing more than their fair share**

Gender inequalities in the home undoubtedly make it difficult to achieve gender equality in the workplace. This is a cause for public concern. The state has an important role to play in reducing work-family conflict for both men and women. However, the public is likely to be cautious about specific policy changes because opinions are shaped by existing practices and constraints. We have seen, for example, that there is almost zero support for any gender role reversal when it comes to preferences for juggling work and family responsibilities. However there is a non-trivial minority who support a more equitable divide of parental leave between mothers and fathers.

The literature depicts two extremes when discussing trends in gender equality. On the one hand we have suggestions that there is a 'rising tide' of support for gender equality (Ingelhart and Norris, 2003); on the other hand we are told that there has been an 'incomplete revolution' (Esping-Andersen, 2009). On balance, the findings from this chapter are more equivocal. The British public perceives a mismatch between depictions of gender-neutral 'adult worker' families and the practical realities of the gender division of paid and unpaid labour, especially when children are young. Is the gender role revolution stalled? Or are we seeing what can be called a 'structural lag' – whereby men and societal institutions (parental leave, childcare, employment, and so on) have to catch up with the realities of changing families and women's new roles? Only time will tell.

### Notes

1. When this question was originally developed in 1984, it asked about "a husband" and "a wife" rather than "a man" and "a woman". This was replaced by a variant of the question using the latter terminology in 1994.
2. In 2002 and later years, answer categories were framed with reference to the respondent – "always me", "usually me", "about equal", "usually spouse/partner" and "always spouse/partner". In 1994 and earlier years, response categories were framed with reference to the gender of the individual performing the specific task – "always the woman", "usually the woman", "equal or both", "usually the man" or "always the man". The data presented in Table 5.6 was re-classified for the later years, to reflect the format in which the question was asked in earlier years.

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## Appendix

The data on which Figure 5.1 is based are shown below.

**Table A.1 Trends in employment by hours worked and sex, Great Britain, 1984–2012**

Year	Number in full-time work		Number in part-time work	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
1984	13441	5578	633	4353
1985	13525	5718	664	4452
1986	13426	5860	696	4507
1987	13451	5999	775	4617
1988	13855	6291	865	4738
1989	14243	6537	841	4943
1990	14247	6683	906	4947
1991	13776	6565	920	4952
1992	13129	6454	989	5033
1993	12803	6398	1021	5080
1994	12858	6408	1087	5152
1995	12957	6503	1152	5206
1996	12951	6550	1240	5318
1997	13179	6678	1284	5385
1998	13302	6772	1294	5427
1999	13408	6935	1359	5466
2000	13539	6978	1370	5597
2001	13624	7098	1402	5586
2002	13604	7203	1493	5620
2003	13687	7222	1570	5702
2004	13771	7353	1629	5727
2005	13880	7596	1650	5643
2006	13968	7666	1690	5701
2007	14070	7731	1747	5680
2008	14073	7856	1826	5684
2009	13625	7715	1866	5753
2010	13536	7616	2001	5865
2011	13607	7680	2009	5870
2012	13714	7738	2125	5942

The data on which Figures 5.2, 5.3 and 5.4 are based are shown below.

**Table A.2 Attitudes to male and female roles in workplace and home, 1984–2012**

	1984	1987	1989	1994	2002	2006	2012
<b>Attitudes to gender roles</b>							
% agree a man's job is to earn money; a woman's job is to look after the home and family	43	48	28	24	17	16	13
% agree both the man and woman should contribute to the household income	n/a	n/a	53	60	59	67	62
<b>Women's preferences/experiences of roles</b>							
% agree a job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children	n/a	36	31	25	23	30	26
% agree being a housewife is just as fulfilling as working for pay	n/a	n/a	41	41	44	44	45
<b>Implications of roles for children/families</b>							
% agree a working mother can establish just as warm and secure a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work	n/a	n/a	58	63	64	64	77
% agree a pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works	n/a	n/a	46	38	36	35	30
% agree all in all, family life suffers when the woman has a full-time job	n/a	n/a	42	32	35	35	27
<i>Weighted base</i>	1522	1243	1274	1000	1984	1842	953
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1562	1281	1307	984	1960	1845	950

*n/a = not asked*

The data on which Figure 5.5 is based are shown below.

**Table A.3 Agreement with a traditional division of gender roles (man's job to earn money; women's job to look after home and family), by generation, 1984–2012**

Cohort	Age in 1984	Age in 2012	% agree man's job to earn money; woman's job to look after home and family					
			1984	1989	1994	2002	2006	2012
1970s		33–42				8	9	9
<i>Weighted base</i>						310	316	161
<i>Unweighted base</i>						298	314	154
1960s		43–52		11	14	9	11	5
<i>Weighted base</i>				249	233	423	365	177
<i>Unweighted base</i>				250	238	436	373	164
1950s	25–34	53–62	28	11	18	14	7	9
<i>Weighted base</i>			295	251	184	339	284	154
<i>Unweighted base</i>			299	246	174	312	282	155
1940s	35–44	63–72	31	21	23	20	14	18
<i>Weighted base</i>			274	228	179	337	271	150
<i>Unweighted base</i>			276	237	160	326	299	187
1930s	45–54	73–82	39	38	33	27	34	
<i>Weighted base</i>			212	161	137	217	231	
<i>Unweighted base</i>			224	180	134	235	246	
1920s	55–64	83–92	57	50	46	46	42	
<i>Weighted base</i>			262	188	115	154	105	
<i>Unweighted base</i>			275	196	133	184	122	
1910s	65–74		71	69				
<i>Weighted base</i>			189	106				
<i>Unweighted base</i>			187	107				

At **NatCen Social Research** we believe that social research has the power to make life better. By really understanding the complexity of people's lives and what they think about the issues that affect them, we give the public a powerful and influential role in shaping decisions and services that can make a difference to everyone. And as an independent, not for profit organisation we're able to focus our time and energy on meeting our clients' needs and delivering social research that works for society.

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### **NatCen Social Research**

35 Northampton Square  
London  
EC1V 0AX

[info@natcen.ac.uk](mailto:info@natcen.ac.uk)

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