

Gender Division in Paid and Unpaid Work

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Introduction

Paid and unpaid work remain divided along gender lines because labor markets and households are shaped by social expectations, economic incentives, institutions, and unequal power. The original essay begins with a familiar story in which men hunted and women gathered, then argues that these roles survived into modern ideas of male breadwinners and female homemakers. That history is too simple. Anthropological research shows substantial variation in how societies divide food production, care, leadership, and skilled work. Gender divisions are not fixed biological rules passed unchanged from “cavemen.” They are social arrangements that can become durable because children observe them, employers design jobs around them, governments organize care around them, and families make decisions within unequal wage structures. Marxist feminism, social-reproduction theory, Hochschild’s analysis of household labor, McElhinny’s study of policing, and Williams’s concept of the glass escalator help explain why women and men remain concentrated in different occupations and ranks.

Gender as a Social Organization of Work

Gendered work refers to more than the number of women or men in an occupation. Jobs are also coded through assumptions about which qualities count as masculine or feminine. Leadership, technical authority, physical risk, and uninterrupted availability are often associated with masculinity. Care, patience, emotional support, cleanliness, and routine coordination are often associated with femininity. These associations influence hiring, pay, promotion, and how the same behavior is evaluated. A decisive man may be seen as confident, while a decisive woman may be described as difficult. A caring woman may be considered naturally suited to unpaid support, while a caring man may receive unusual praise for ordinary parenting.

Paid and Unpaid Work

Paid work is exchanged for wages or salary and is counted more visibly in national economic statistics. Unpaid work includes childcare, eldercare, cooking, cleaning, household administration, emotional support, and community labor. These activities reproduce daily life and make paid employment possible. A worker arrives at a job fed, clothed, cared for, and supported because someone performed that labor. When unpaid work is treated as private affection rather than economically necessary activity, its unequal distribution becomes easy to ignore.

Marxist Feminism

Marxist feminism examines how capitalism and gender hierarchy interact. Employers benefit when households reproduce labor at little direct cost to firms. Women's unpaid domestic work has historically supported male wage labor, while women's paid work has often been concentrated in lower-paid occupations resembling domestic roles. This analysis does not claim that every husband deliberately exploits a wife or that capitalism alone created patriarchy. It asks how economic systems organize production and reproduction and why essential care work remains undervalued.

Social-Reproduction Theory

Social-reproduction theory expands attention beyond childbirth. It includes the activities and institutions that maintain people across generations: families, schools, healthcare, food systems, housing, and care. Much of this work is performed by women, frequently underpaid or unpaid. During crises, the importance of social reproduction becomes especially visible. When schools or care services close, households must absorb the work, and women often reduce paid hours or leave employment. The division of unpaid labor therefore affects career progression, pension accumulation, and lifetime income.

Reproductive Labor

The original essay defines reproductive labor as reproduction, childcare, and housework. It should also include planning, emotional management, healthcare coordination, transportation, shopping, and the "mental load" of anticipating needs. A person may perform fewer visible tasks while still carrying responsibility for remembering appointments, school requirements, meals, medications, and family relationships. Because this work is difficult to measure, couples can disagree about whether labor is equal. Time-use research and detailed task discussion make the burden more visible.

Why Unpaid Work Remains Unequal

Several forces reinforce inequality. Women may earn less before children arrive, making it appear financially rational for them to reduce paid work. Employers may expect mothers, but not fathers, to interrupt careers. Parental leave may be structured so that fathers take little time. Cultural standards judge women more harshly for household disorder or caregiving gaps. Men may perform tasks framed as occasional projects while women manage repetitive daily work. Each decision can appear private, yet together they reproduce a national pattern.

Hochschild's Marital Ideologies

Arlie Hochschild and Anne Machung described traditional, transitional, and egalitarian gender ideologies in household life. In a traditional arrangement, the man is identified primarily with paid work and the woman with home and care. In an egalitarian arrangement, both partners seek comparable participation in paid work and domestic responsibility. Transitional arrangements combine women's employment with continuing expectations that they remain primarily responsible for the home. The transitional pattern helps explain why women's entry into paid work did not automatically create equal domestic labor.

The Second Shift

Hochschild's concept of the "second shift" describes paid workers returning home to another round of housework and childcare. The issue is not that every woman performs more work than every man. It is the recurring pattern in heterosexual households whereby women's paid employment rises without an equal transfer of domestic responsibility. This affects rest, leisure, health, and career development. A worker who handles evening care has less time for networking, overtime, training, or uninterrupted study.

Traditional Marital Roles

Traditional roles may be chosen by some couples and can provide a workable division when both partners possess genuine voice, economic security, and recognition. The risk appears when unpaid dependence limits the caregiver's ability to leave an unsafe relationship, build retirement savings, or return to employment. Traditional arrangements are also difficult for families that need two incomes. A policy system should not stigmatize full-time caregivers, but it should protect them through social insurance, pension recognition, and access to training.

Transitional Marital Roles

In a transitional arrangement, a woman's employment may be welcomed as additional household income while her partner's job is treated as the main career. Her work becomes flexible when a child is sick, a relative needs care, or the household schedule changes. This can create a cumulative gap even when both partners describe themselves as modern. The woman may choose a lower-paid occupation with predictable hours because the family assumes she will remain available. Later, the wage difference is used to justify the same arrangement.

Egalitarian Roles

Egalitarian relationships require more than a statement that both partners believe in equality. They require equal responsibility for noticing, planning, and completing work. An equal division may not mean each task is split exactly in half. Partners can specialize according to preference and skill, but both need comparable leisure, career opportunity, and decision-making power. Regular discussion becomes necessary because workloads change with children, illness, employment, and aging parents.

Occupational Segregation

Horizontal segregation occurs when women and men work in different occupations or specialties. Women are often concentrated in education, healthcare, administration, retail, and care, while men remain more common in construction, engineering, trades, policing, and some technology fields. Vertical segregation occurs when women are present in an occupation but underrepresented in senior ranks. The two forms interact. A sector can employ many women while leadership remains male, and a male-dominated occupation can assign women to particular roles considered more feminine.

Why “Women’s Work” Is Often Underpaid

Care and communication require skill, but they are often described as natural feminine qualities rather than acquired competencies. When work is seen as an extension of motherhood or personality, employers can justify low pay. Occupational value is socially constructed. Jobs do not pay less simply because women enter them, but historical association with women can influence wages, bargaining power, and public funding. Comparable-worth debates ask whether different occupations requiring similar levels of skill, responsibility, effort, and conditions are valued fairly.

The Gender Pay Gap

The gender pay gap reflects several factors: occupational segregation, work experience, hours, caregiving interruptions, discrimination, promotion patterns, and the distribution of high-paying roles. An unadjusted gap does not prove that an employer pays a woman less than a man for identical work, but controlling for observable factors does not make inequality disappear morally or legally. Those factors may themselves be shaped by gendered institutions. Analysis should distinguish equal-pay violations from broader labor-market inequality.

The Motherhood Penalty and Fatherhood Premium

Mothers may be viewed as less committed or available, while fathers may be viewed as stable providers deserving advancement. These stereotypes affect hiring, assignments, and pay even when actual performance is similar. Pregnancy and caregiving can interrupt work, but flexible schedules and leave are often treated as individual accommodations rather than normal organizational needs. If flexibility is available only in low-status roles, workers face a choice between career and care. Policies should normalize caregiving among men and senior employees as well as women.

Gender and Police Work

Policing is historically coded as masculine because it emphasizes authority, physical danger, command, and control. Yet police work also requires communication, de-escalation, investigation, documentation, community trust, and emotional regulation. Women entering policing challenge the assumption that effective authority has one body type or interaction style. They may also face pressure to demonstrate toughness while avoiding behavior judged unfeminine. The contradiction shows how occupational cultures define competence through gendered expectations.

McElhinny's Analysis of Police Language

Bonnie McElhinny examined how female police officers navigate language and gender identity. Referential markers name categories explicitly, while indexical meanings associate behaviors or speech styles with masculinity or femininity. A serious tone may be interpreted as masculine even though seriousness is not biologically male. Women officers may adapt speech and posture to claim authority, but their adaptation can be judged as inauthentic or aggressive. The issue is not simply whether women can perform police work. It is whether the organization defines professionalism through a narrow masculine norm.

Women in Canadian Policing

Women's representation in Canadian policing has increased substantially from the low levels recorded in the 1980s, but women remain a minority among police officers and are distributed unevenly across ranks and services. Statistics Canada continues to publish sex-disaggregated data on sworn personnel and ranks, showing progress alongside continuing imbalance. The existence of more women officers does not prove that promotion, specialty assignment, harassment, equipment, and scheduling problems have been solved. Representation is a starting measure rather than a complete equality assessment.

The Royal Newfoundland Constabulary Example

The original essay uses the Royal Newfoundland Constabulary as a news-based example of women entering sworn and civilian roles. Organizational campaigns that highlight women leaders can challenge the image of policing as exclusively male. However, public celebration should be compared with workforce data and employee experience. A service may employ many women in civilian positions while operational command remains male. Analysis should separate different occupational categories rather than combine them into one diversity percentage.

The Glass Ceiling

The glass ceiling describes invisible structural barriers preventing qualified women from reaching senior positions. These barriers include informal networks, subjective promotion criteria, exclusion from critical assignments, sponsorship differences, harassment, and assumptions about family responsibility. Because the barrier is “glass,” organizations can claim that promotion is open while patterns remain stable. A useful analysis examines the pipeline: who is hired, trained, evaluated as high potential, promoted, and retained.

The Glass Escalator

Christine Williams used the term glass escalator to describe advantages some men experience in female-dominated occupations. Men may be encouraged toward administration, specialized technical roles, or leadership and receive praise for qualities treated as ordinary in women. The effect is not universal. Race, sexuality, class, disability, and organizational context shape whether a man receives advantage. The concept shows that entering a lower-paid feminized occupation does not necessarily expose men to the same barriers women face within it.

Intersectionality

Gender does not operate alone. Racialized women, Indigenous women, immigrant workers, disabled women, queer and transgender people, and low-income caregivers can face different forms of disadvantage. A general statistic about women can hide large differences. For example, professional women may purchase domestic labor performed by lower-paid migrant or racialized women, shifting rather than eliminating the gendered burden. Policies should consider who gains and who performs the remaining work.

Remote Work

Remote work can reduce commuting and increase flexibility, but it can also bring paid and unpaid labor into the same space. Women working from home may be treated as continuously available for care and household tasks. Men's remote work can increase caregiving participation when families renegotiate responsibility, but the effect is not automatic. Employers should evaluate performance by results and avoid assuming that a visible office presence equals commitment. Families also need explicit agreements about work time.

Care Infrastructure

Childcare, eldercare, disability services, healthcare, school schedules, and public transport shape gender equality. When affordable services are unavailable, families perform the work privately, and women often absorb it. Investment in care infrastructure supports children and dependent adults while increasing labor-force choice. Care workers also need adequate pay and conditions. Expanding services through low wages merely transfers the burden from unpaid women to underpaid women.

Parental Leave

Leave policy affects whether caregiving becomes identified with mothers. Maternity recovery and breastfeeding may require specific support, but parental care can be shared. Nontransferable leave for fathers or second parents can normalize men's participation and reduce employers' assumption that only women will be absent. Leave must be adequately paid; an unpaid entitlement is unusable for many families. Managers should also avoid penalizing employees who use it.

Organizational Change

Employers can audit pay, promotion, scheduling, assignments, and turnover by gender and other relevant characteristics. Job descriptions should identify actual requirements and avoid masculine-coded expectations unrelated to performance. Structured promotion criteria, transparent salary bands, accessible complaint systems, and sponsorship can reduce bias. Flexible work should be available across career levels. Change is credible when leaders are accountable for outcomes, not only attendance at training.

Household Change

Policy cannot determine every private arrangement, but households can make labor visible. Couples can list recurring tasks, identify who notices and plans them, compare leisure time, and renegotiate

after major changes. Children can be taught that care and cleaning are human responsibilities rather than gendered identities. Equality develops through habits as well as beliefs. A partner who “helps” still implies that the work belongs to someone else; shared ownership changes that assumption.

Conclusion

Work remains gendered because paid employment and unpaid care are organized through historical norms, wage inequalities, occupational cultures, and institutions. Marxist feminism and social-reproduction theory show how unpaid labor supports the economy. Hochschild explains why women’s entry into employment often creates a second shift rather than equal domestic responsibility. McElhinny demonstrates how masculine meanings shape policing, while Williams shows that men can receive advancement advantages in feminized occupations. Progress in women’s employment and policing is real, but representation does not eliminate occupational segregation, the glass ceiling, or unequal care. Sustainable change requires fair pay, care infrastructure, shared parental leave, transparent promotion, inclusive occupational cultures, and a more equal distribution of household responsibility.

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