



The study – which examined the roles men and women play in terms of childcare and housework during the pandemic last year, and the difference in the amount of time they spent on such tasks – found that the gender gap in terms of housework rose during the circuit breaker and persisted for all families, regardless of their income. PHOTO: ISTOCKPHOTO

Women’s marital satisfaction fell during pandemic: Study

Increase in housework, conflicts arising from work-from-home set-up among possible reasons

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Women were less satisfied with their marriages during and after the circuit breaker, a study has found.

The researchers said it could be because they had to take on more than their fair share of housework, among other stressors the pandemic has brought to daily life.

The study examined the roles men and women play in terms of childcare and housework during the pandemic last year, and the difference in the amount of time they spent on such tasks.

For the study, Dr Tan Poh Lin, assistant professor at the National University of Singapore’s Lee Kuan

Yew School of Public Policy, and her co-authors polled 290 married women who have at least one child.

The women were part of a larger group of 660 married women Dr Tan has been interviewing since 2018 on various aspects of their married life, including sexual frequency and when they had babies.

The other authors are Dr Emma Zang, an assistant professor at Yale University; Mr Thomas Lyttelton, a Yale PhD student; and Ms Anna Guo, a master’s student also at Yale.

In the study, which was presented virtually at the Population Association of America’s annual conference earlier this month, the researchers found that about 5 per cent of parents had lost their jobs amid the pandemic.

For those who kept their jobs, 30 per cent of mothers and 40 per cent of fathers saw their income shrink.

The study found that the mothers’ marital and life satisfaction fell significantly during and after the circuit breaker – which lasted from April 7 to June 1 last year – when all non-essential activities

DOING MORE THAN THEIR FAIR SHARE

As people spent more time at home during and after the circuit breaker, the amount of housework that had to be done increased. This created an increase in the gender gap as women did most of this extra housework, largely because housework is generally considered ‘women’s work’.



DR TAN POH LIN, assistant professor at the National University of Singapore’s Lee Kuan Yew School of Public Policy and a co-author of the study.

ground to a halt and many Singaporeans worked from home.

The researchers noted that before the pandemic, the mothers’ mean marital satisfaction score was 3.9 out of a five-point scale, with 5 being very satisfied. It fell to 3.6 during and after the circuit breaker.

Dr Tan said one reason for the slide could be that the women had to shoulder more housework.

But conflicts arising from work-from-home arrangements and tensions as a result of the uncertainty brought about by the pandemic could have also contributed to the fall in satisfaction.

The gender gap in terms of housework rose during the circuit breaker and persisted for all families, regardless of their income, the authors said.

Before the circuit breaker, women spent an average of 68 minutes a day on household chores, while men spent 43 minutes a day.

This rose to 112 minutes during the circuit breaker and 108 minutes after the period for women. For men, it rose to 63 minutes dur-

ing the circuit breaker and 66 minutes after the period.

Dr Tan said: “As people spent more time at home during and after the circuit breaker, the amount of housework that had to be done increased.

“This created an increase in the gender gap as women did most of this extra housework, largely because housework is generally considered ‘women’s work’.”

For families in which at least one spouse earns \$4,000 or more, the gender gap on childcare narrowed during and after the circuit breaker.

The difference in time spent shrunk from 125 minutes before the pandemic to 108 minutes during the circuit breaker and 79 minutes after the period.

Dr Tan said: “By contrast, even though childcare is also most commonly done by women, men are generally more willing to help out as it may be more rewarding and meaningful.”

She said the study is not representative of Singapore’s population of married women but is still noteworthy.

This is because it tracks the same set of respondents before, during and after the circuit breaker, whereas most other studies do not.

But there is a caveat: Dr Tan said the men were not interviewed, owing to budgetary constraints, and data on how they spent their time and other variables were collected from their wives.

She said: “As the Government continues to encourage employers to offer flexible work arrangements and fathers to contribute more to child-rearing, it is important to note that the widespread shift to telecommuting coincided with a disproportionate rise in housework burdens on women.”

Associate Professor Tan Ern Ser, a sociologist, said the gender gap when it comes to housework could be due to the gender roles men were socialised into playing from childhood.

However, there has been a significant shift towards gender equality as Singapore society becomes more affluent and modernised.

Prof Tan said: “In this whole debate on housework, we need to consider a range of factors, and not just who is doing more or less. Couples do need to make rational decisions on how best to respond to their family circumstances. The outcome may look unequal, but it could be the decisions of an egalitarian couple.”

“This is not to let men who don’t see housework as part of their joint responsibilities as a couple off the hook, but neither should we be too quick to judge just by looking at the housework gap.”

Ms Shailey Hingorani, head of research and advocacy at the Association of Women for Action and Research, said the increase in unpaid labour for women during the pandemic has taken a huge toll on women’s mental and physical health and employment status, among other things.

She added: “The finding that women’s marital and life satisfaction has dipped does not bode well for these women’s spouses, children and other family members.”

“Unhappy women are not likely to want to stay in their marriages and have children.”

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