

Marital satisfaction for women fell during circuit breaker: Study

Increase in housework and work-from-home conflicts 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.

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 incomes shrink.

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

Dr Tan said: "As people spent more time at home during and after the circuit breaker, the amount of housework 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 said the study is not representative of Singapore's population of married women but is still noteworthy as 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."

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