

## Symmetry in Domestic Life: a Myth or Reality? The Case of Masvingo Urban Households, Zimbabwe

Dekeza Clyton and Kufakunesu Moses

Educational Foundations Department, Faculty of Education,  
Great Zimbabwe University, Zimbabwe

**Corresponding Author: Kufakunesu Moses**

---

### Abstract

*The study was an endeavour to verify the authenticity of the assertion that symmetry in domestic life is a myth by considering Masvingo urban households. The zeal to establish the trends in domestic life amid pressure exerted on the family institution by variables such as industrialisation, modernisation and gender advocacy has motivated the researchers to embark on the study. The liberal, Marxist and radical feminist perspectives informed the study. The descriptive survey research design was employed with semi-structured interviews and observations as the data collection instruments. A sample of eighty (80) households was purposively drawn. The study established that domestic chores were done more by women than by men although more symmetry in domestic life was found in households where both spouses were wage earners than in households in which one spouse was gainfully employed. Traditional practices such as the payment of bride wealth were found to be militating against symmetry in domestic life. The researchers recommended that feminist organisations and other stakeholders should step up efforts to disseminate information on gender equality in the private sphere coupled with creating more employment opportunities for women since wage earning was noted to be propitious for symmetry in domestic life.*

---

**Keywords:** symmetry, domestic life, domestic chores, patriarchy, feminism, household, housemaid

---

### INTRODUCTION

Industrialisation and modernisation have impacted significantly on family life including the manner in which spouses undertake domestic chores (Giddens, 2009; Haralambos and Holborn, 2010). Industrialisation and the attendant technological innovations have turned the world into a global village. Zimbabwe has been exposed to Western cultures through cultural diffusion and hence the family structure and gendered relations have been influenced in one way or the other. Freedman (2001) posits that new reproductive technologies brought by industrialisation meant that women are no longer tied to the biological function of reproduction. There are new opportunities for women to obtain equality. The structure of families and relationships between husbands and wives have changed considerably over the years ([http://www.coursework.info/AS\\_and\\_A\\_Level/Sociology/Family\\_Marriage/Some\\_Sociologists\\_argue\\_that\\_with\\_the\\_r\\_L853816.html](http://www.coursework.info/AS_and_A_Level/Sociology/Family_Marriage/Some_Sociologists_argue_that_with_the_r_L853816.html)). It was against this background that the researchers embarked on a study in an endeavour to establish if symmetry in domestic life was actually a reality or a myth in Masvingo urban households in Zimbabwe. Feminist movement is one factor that has brought about changes in domestic life. Walby in Haralambos and Holborn (2010) argues that feminist struggles have led to significant changes in households and the relationships between men and women in the family. It was through the relentless efforts of feminist organisations that gender has found a place on

international agenda of bodies such as United Nations. For instance, gender equality and empowerment of women is the third United Nations Millennium development goal. This study sought to explore the position of Masvingo urban households with regard to gender equality in domestic life against a plethora of forces emanating from the international publicity gained by gender issues.

For economic, political and ideological reasons, increasing emphasis is now being placed (by both sociologists and the participants themselves) on the concept of a symmetrical form of family relationship (<http://www.sociology.org.uk>). A symmetrical family is an egalitarian family where spouses share domestic chores equally. The relationship between spouses in a symmetrical family is described as joint conjugal (Haralambos and Holborn, 2010). Some sociologists argue that, with the rise of the symmetrical family, the patriarchal power of the husband has disappeared and relationships have become more equal and democratic ([http://www.coursework.info/AS\\_and\\_A\\_Level/Sociology/Family\\_Marriage/Some\\_sociologists\\_argue\\_that\\_with\\_the\\_r\\_L853816.html](http://www.coursework.info/AS_and_A_Level/Sociology/Family_Marriage/Some_sociologists_argue_that_with_the_r_L853816.html)). Therborn (2004) asserts that when women are employed, they are afforded more equality at home. In a symmetrical family the authoritarian relations between men and their families which comprise women and children give way to more egalitarian relationships (Polen, 2001). Willmott and Young conducted research studies in London and established that family life in

Britain was becoming increasingly symmetrical with a home-centred approach in which conjugal roles were jointly undertaken by both husbands and wives ([http://www.coursework.info/AS\\_and\\_A\\_Level/Sociology/Family\\_Marriage/Some\\_sociologists\\_argue\\_that\\_\\_with\\_the\\_r\\_L853816.html](http://www.coursework.info/AS_and_A_Level/Sociology/Family_Marriage/Some_sociologists_argue_that__with_the_r_L853816.html)). Studies conducted by Elizabeth Bott in London revealed that a symmetrical family in which conjugal roles are equally shared is possible although it depends on the family's social class (<http://www.sociology.org.uk>). Conjugal roles have changed from inequality based on male domination to greater equality as evidenced by the symmetrical family put forward by Bott as well as Willmott and Young (<http://www.sociology.org.uk>).

However, Willmott and Young's research findings were challenged by Ann Oakley who claimed that the symmetrical family was a myth (<http://www.exampleessay.com>). Oakley, who happens to be a feminist, criticised Willmott and Young's theory that husbands help around the home as inaccurate. On the basis of her own research findings, Oakley argues that although there has been an increase in gainfully employed women, being a housewife is still seen as their primary role ([http://www.coursework.info/AS\\_and\\_A\\_Level/Sociology/Family\\_\\_Marriage/Some\\_sociologists\\_argue\\_that\\_\\_with\\_the\\_r\\_L853816.html](http://www.coursework.info/AS_and_A_Level/Sociology/Family__Marriage/Some_sociologists_argue_that__with_the_r_L853816.html)). Oakley challenged the findings of Willmott and Young by asserting that being a housewife is actually an occupation which is dominated by females (<http://www.sociology.org.uk>). Oakley further argued that Willmott and Young's findings were representative of a male ideology and were not a true picture of what was happening. She lambasted Willmott and Young for using a quantitative research which lacked depth in fully portraying social reality (<http://www.exampleessay.com>). It was through pondering over such contradicting research findings that the researchers decided to explore the subject of domestic symmetry in Masvingo urban households.

According to Lee (2005:172), in the traditional South Korean families, men never went into the kitchen since it was considered as their wives' domain. Even in more progressive modern families, if a South Korean man wants even a glass of water from the kitchen; his wife has to get it for him. In the same vein, Taskinen (2001:2) indicates that in Finland, "Mothers spend considerably more time on domestic tasks than do fathers, and this is also true for women who work full-time". Jelin and Diaz-Munoz (2003:20) elaborate that in South America, women remain more actively involved in domestic chores than their male counterparts although there are increasing pressures on men to actively participate in domestic tasks. Relatively similar findings were established in Spain where men are getting more involved in domestic chores (<http://www.pobronson.com/factbook/pages/83.html>).

According to Cordon (2001:2), a recent survey conducted in Spain established that young couples saw sharing domestic tasks as one of the key conditions for a successful partnership. Wall (2001:2) claims that in Portugal, the majority of couples are expressing positive attitudes being committed to a symmetrical family in which the partners share responsibilities although the change in the allocation of household chores has been significantly low. Wall (2001:2) reiterates that a survey conducted in Portugal in 1999 revealed that only 20% of the couples were actually sharing all the main household chores which entail cooking, cleaning and doing the laundry.

Another variable which can determine the extent of symmetry in domestic chores among couples is the presence of a housemaid. According to Brooks (2006:132), "In Hong Kong and Singapore, the role of foreign domestic maids is crucial in facilitating successful career and indeed partnerships". This implies that women can have more time to attend to other issues when part of the domestic duties is done by the maid. The presence of maids neutralises potential difficulties as regards child responsibilities (Brooks, 2006:132). Moreover, Brooks (2006:132) claims that the existence of support from housemaids gives professional women considerable freedom to pursue their career and quality of life issues. It was with such considerations in mind that the researchers decided to undertake a research study pertaining to the degree of symmetry in domestic life.

### **Theoretical Framework**

The study was informed by feminist theories namely liberal feminism, Marxist feminism and radical feminism. Liberal feminists place emphasis on the concept of gender role socialisation. They argue that gender differences hinge on the culture of the society and the attitudes of individuals. Liberal feminists assert that the traditional expectations of female and male roles and discrimination are key obstacles which need to be overcome in order to liberate females. The creation of equal opportunities in education and work to address gender imbalances is the main aim of liberal feminists (Freedman, 2001; Barnard, Burges and Kirby, 2004; Schaefar, 2010). Marxist feminists regard the economic position of women as crucial to their oppression. They argue that oppression starts in the family where women do unpaid work and depend on their husbands. Marxist feminists view women as an industrial reserve army which can be hired when need be by capitalists (Haralambos and Holborn, 2010; Giddens, 2009; Barnard, Burges and Kirby, 2004) Radical feminists view men's domination of women as a result of a system of patriarchy. They are concerned with sexual politics, that is, the ways in which men dominate women in the family and in sexual and personal relations. Giddens (2009) argues that the roots of

patriarchy are in the family where the male dominates women's reproductive capacities. Smart (2007) views unpaid labour done by women in the family home as a key to their exploitation. She argues that the domestic situation is the main enemy of women since it enables men to dominate and control women. Women have been relegated to a secondary status in society in which they are confined to roles in the home.

**Research Questions**

The research study was guided by the following research questions:

- a) Do spouses in Masvingo urban share domestic chores equally?
- b) Which variables impinge upon the attainment of symmetry in domestic life?

**METHODOLOGY**

**Research Design**

The researchers adopted a descriptive survey design for this study. The design was deemed appropriate since data was to be collected from a relatively large sample over a short period of time. Moreover, the descriptive survey research design was employed because of its suitability in the exploration of social phenomena at a given time. In this regard Haralambos and Holborn (2010:821) maintain that data can be collected over a large sample in a short space of time through survey methods.

**Population and Sample**

A sample of eighty (80) households was purposively selected from a population of 500 households in Rujeko high density area in Masvingo urban. The purposive sampling technique was employed since only households in which both spouses were present were sampled. The researchers had to target those households in which there was a high probability of honestly furnishing the researchers with the extent to which symmetry in domestic life prevailed in their respective homes.

**Data Collection Instruments**

The instruments used to gather data in this study were the semi-structured interviews and observations. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they offered the researchers the opportunity to deviate from the pre-determined questions on the interview guide to explore any unexpected but relevant issues raised by the respondents during interview sessions (Barnard, Burgess and Kirby, 2004). The researchers relied on non-participant observations to complement the data collected through the semi-structured interviews. Chiromo (2006:27) clarifies, "Observation seeks to ascertain what people think and do by watching them in action as they express themselves in various situations and activities". The data collected through the interviews was corroborated with data collected through

observations.

**Findings of the Study**

The following findings were established:

1. Domestic chores were done more by females than males. More than 50% of the participants viewed cooking, washing, sweeping and mopping, firewood gathering and the tending of gardens as exclusively feminine responsibilities.
2. Households in which both spouses were employed were more symmetrical than households in which one spouse was employed.
3. Households with spouses with post-primary school education were more egalitarian than couples who were illiterate or semi illiterate.
4. Husbands in households that engaged housemaids did little in terms of domestic chores than husbands in households with no housemaids.
5. The engagement of a housemaid increased symmetry in domestic life through the limited participation of both spouses in domestic chores.

**PRESENTATION AND ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS**

The results in Table 1 below indicate that 70 (87.5 %) of the domestic chores explored were viewed by more than 40 (50%) of the participants as feminine tasks. Cooking , washing, fuel gathering and caring for children as well as sweeping and mopping were viewed as heavily feminine tasks by more than 59 (73.75%) of the participants. A sizeable number of participants, that is, 25 (31.25%) and 20 (25%) respectively indicated that shopping of family grocery items and taking of grain to the grinding mill were done by both sides equally.

**Table 1: Distribution of Domestic Chores By Gender: n = 80.**

ACTIVITY	GENDER RESPONSIBLE					
	Males		Female		Both Sexes Equally	
	f	%	f	%	f	%
Cooking	5	6,25	70	87,5	5	6,25
Washing	3	3,75	63	78,75	14	17,5
Sweeping & Mopping	6	7,5	68	85	6	7,5
Caring for Children	6	7,5	59	75	15	18,75
Tending Garden	15	18,3	53	66,25	12	15
Taking grain to the mill	20	25	40	50	20	25
Fuel gathering	5	6,25	61	76,25	14	17,5
Shopping family grocery	18	22,5	37	46,25	25	31,25

## DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study established that domestic chores were done more frequently by females than by males in all the 80 (100%) households studied. More than 50 % of the participants viewed cooking, washing, sweeping and mopping, fuel gathering and tending of gardens as exclusively female responsibilities. This was in agreement with the trends in countries such as South Korea, Finland and Portugal as claimed by Lee (2005:172), Taskinen (2001:2) and Wall (2001:2) respectively. However, such research findings were different from the practice in Spain in which sharing domestic chores especially by young couples is to some extent a fundamental prerequisite for a functional marital union (Cordon, 2001:2).

On the basis of the research findings, it can be argued that Oakley's assertion that symmetry in domestic life is a myth remains valid. The research findings of Willmott and Young which led to the theory that modern families are typically symmetrical in relation to domestic life could not be fully supported by the collected data. However, the researchers established that younger couples were to some extent gravitating towards establishing symmetry in their domestic lives. This partially concurred with the trends in the lives of young couples in South America (Jelin Diaz-Munoz, 2003:20) and Spain (Cordon, 2001:2)

A variety of reasons were advanced by the participants to justify the idea that women should be the main players in domestic work. Cultural practices which stipulate that men should pay bride wealth (*lobola*) and traditional values which support the view that women's place is in the home as well as gender socialisation were cited in support of lack of symmetry in domestic life. Gender socialisation was found to have an influence in gender inequality in domestic life. 58(73%) of the participants indicated that culturally men and women were socialised to believe that domestic work is for women while men engage in public work. Traditional values which regard household chores as the wife's duty had been noted as militating against equality in family life. The findings were in line with the views of liberal feminists who attribute lack of symmetry in domestic life to gender socialisation and culture (Giddens, 2009; Freedman, 2001). However, the respondents were not in agreement with the sentiments of radical feminists who allege that men dominate women in sexual and personal relationships. Since the emphasis of the study was on symmetry in domestic life, the respondents were rationally not keen to allude to sexual matters.

The study also established that there was more symmetry in domestic life in households where both spouses were employed. In exploring this observation, it emerged that employed women were afforded more equality at home. The participants

indicated that women who were employed played a larger part in decision making than do women who were not employed. The cases in which women were unemployed to some extent mirrored the views of Marxist feminists who claim that women provide unpaid domestic labour and are financially dependent on their husbands. However, the researchers observed that in some households, even if the wife was employed she was expected to do domestic chores just as the experience in Finland as portrayed by Taskinen (2001:2). One female respondent remarked:

*Even if I spent the whole day at work, when I get home, I am expected to do domestic chores.*

This scenario was blamed on the patriarchal nature of society.

Another striking observation was that there was more symmetry in households in which spouses held post-primary school qualifications than where couples were illiterate or semi-illiterate. Upon making further inquiries into this phenomenon, the researchers gathered that literate couples accessed information relating to gender issues through print and electronic media and at least made an effort to implement the ideas in domestic life. On the other hand, illiterate and semi-illiterate couples indicated that they relied on gender advocacy campaigns which were rarely conducted in their residential areas. Because of limited sources of information on gender equality, a sizeable number of illiterate and semi-illiterate couples expressed ignorance of interventions on gender equality that the government and non-governmental organisations initiated.

The researchers also found out that 30 (37.5%) of the sampled households had housemaids. The wives in these households reported minimum to non-participation of husbands in domestic chores. In interrogating the matter, the husbands indicated that they saw no need to engage in domestic chores since the housemaids were engaged to do domestic chores. In 36 out of the 48 (75%) households with housemaids, the wives reported that they were doing little in terms of domestic chores since they were habitually out working and only assisted housemaids when off duty. In such households both wives and husbands concurred that they treated each other as equals and domestic symmetry was promoted by limited participation in domestic chores by both spouses. The role of housemaids in facilitating the establishment of symmetry in domestic chores was also emphasised by Brooks (2006:132) who claims that housemaids helped women to have time to attend to other issues such as their careers or strengthening relationships with their spouses.

## CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the researchers concluded that:

- a) Domestic chores were to a larger extent a female domain in Masvingo urban households. Hence Willmott and Young's idea of symmetry in home life largely turned out to be a myth in Masvingo urban households.
- b) Symmetry in domestic life was promoted by the engagement of both spouses in employment and high levels of literacy of couples.
- c) Engagement of housemaids enhances symmetry of in domestic life.
- d) Variables such as unemployment, illiteracy, gender socialisation in a patriarchal society and traditional values such as payment of the bride wealth foster asymmetry in domestic life thereby militating against creation of egalitarian household.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

The following recommendations emanated from the findings of the research study:

- a) Government and feminist organizations should step up efforts to disseminate information on gender equality in both urban and rural areas.
- b) Employers should create more opportunities for the employment of women to empower them economically and promote symmetry in domestic life.
- c) Government should revive adult literacy programme to raise the literacy level of the populace that people can access information on gender equality through different sources.
- d) Government and feminist organisations should engage community leaders with a view to familiarise communities to do away with traditional practices which undermine the creation of symmetrical families.

### REFERENCES

- Barnard, A, Burgess, T. And Kirby, M (2004) *Sociology*. Cambridge: University Press.
- Brooks, A. (2006) *Gendered Work in Asian Cities: the new economy and changing labour markets*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Ltd
- Chiromo, A.S. (2006) *Research Methods and Statistics in Education: A Students' Guide*. Gweru: Midlands State University
- Cordón, J.A.F. (2001) *The Situation of Families in Spain in 2001*. European Observatory on Family Matter. Archived at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/eoss/downloads/gm\\_01\\_spain\\_cordon\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/eoss/downloads/gm_01_spain_cordon_en.pdf)
- Freedman, J. (2001) *Concepts in the Social Sciences: Feminism*. Buckingham. Philadelphia: Open University Press.

Giddens, A. (2009) *Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity.

Haralambos, M. and Holborn, N. (2010) *Themes and Perspectives*. London: Collins Educational.

[http://www.coursework.info/AS\\_and\\_A\\_Level/Sociology/Family\\_\\_\\_Marriage/Some\\_sociologists\\_argue\\_that\\_with\\_the\\_r\\_L853816.html](http://www.coursework.info/AS_and_A_Level/Sociology/Family___Marriage/Some_sociologists_argue_that_with_the_r_L853816.html)

<http://www.exampleessays.com/viewpaper/70083.html>

<http://www.pobronson.com/factbook/pages/83.html>

<http://www.sociology.org.uk/fchan1.pdf>

Jelin, E. And Díaz-Muñoz, A.R.(2003) "Major Trends Affecting Families: South America in Perspective," *Major Trends Affecting Families: A Background Document*, Report for United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Social Policy and Development, Program on the Family. Archived at: <http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/family/Publications/mtjel.in.pdf>

Lee, K.K. (2005) "South Korean Families," *Handbook of World Families*, Bert N. Adams and Jan Trost (eds). Sage Publications, Inc., Thousand

Oaks, CA, pp. 167-176. Available through: [http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0761927638/qid=1123855404/sr=8-1/ref=sr\\_8\\_xs\\_ap\\_i1\\_xgl14/104-0887680-4192712?v=glance&s=books&n=507846](http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/tg/detail/-/0761927638/qid=1123855404/sr=8-1/ref=sr_8_xs_ap_i1_xgl14/104-0887680-4192712?v=glance&s=books&n=507846)

Polen, J.J (2001) *Social Problems For the twenty- first Century*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Schaefer, T.R. (2010) *Sociology*. New York: McGraw Hill.

Smart, C. (2007) *Personal Life New Directions in Sociological Thinking*. Cambridge: Polity.

Taskinen , S.(2001) *The Situation of Families in Finland in 2001*, European Observatory on Family Matters (2001) Archived at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/eoss/downloads/gm\\_01\\_finland\\_taskinen\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/eoss/downloads/gm_01_finland_taskinen_en.pdf)

Therborn, G. (2004) *Between Sex and Power: Family in the World, 1900 – 2000*. London / New York: Routledge.

Wall , K. (2001) *The Situation of Families in Portugal in the Late 1990s*, European Observatory on Family Matters .Archived at: [http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment\\_social/eoss/downloads/gm\\_01\\_portugal\\_wall\\_en.pdf](http://europa.eu.int/comm/employment_social/eoss/downloads/gm_01_portugal_wall_en.pdf)