

# The Socioeconomic and Reproductive Health Effects of Unequal Domestic Work on Women in Ghana

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*Social and cultural norms promote the unequal distribution of housework and are a barrier to women's sexual and reproductive health.*

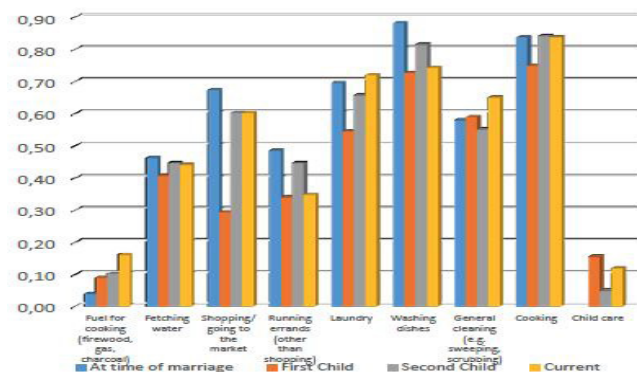
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## Topic at a Glance

In Ghana, women, on average, spend more than three times the average time men spend on domestic work and child care activities. Such a burden created from unequal housework may have implications on women's socio-economic empowerment, particularly, on their labour market and reproductive health outcomes.

In a setting characterised by unequal distribution of domestic work and stalled fertility rates, it is important to examine the tensions between family life and paid work on women's labour market outcomes as well as on their fertility decisions.

Using qualitative data the study explores the effect of unequal distribution of housework on women's labour market outcomes and examines the role that earnings differentials among couples play in the fertility choices of such couples who are married or in a consensual union.



**Gender Gap in Housework and Child Care**

*Caption:* Source: Couples' Survey, 2019  
In all but one of the housework activities (not including childcare), the gender gap declines at the time of the birth of the first child and then widens.

## New Insights

Existing evidence on the labour market implications of unequal distribution of domestic work is limited to more developed countries. Therefore, exploring the relationship between the burden of domestic work and childcare on women and their labour market outcomes in a context that is culturally different from that of advanced countries will have important implications for more effective policymaking.

This study moves away from the dominant quantitative view of factors determining women's fertility outcomes and focuses on the lived experiences of couples to highlight how partnered women make decisions either jointly with their spouses or unilaterally to influence their fertility outcomes.

Childcare responsibilities have implications for the nature of women's engagement in the labour market.

- Women are forced to exit the labour market for extended periods after childbirth due to the challenges of combining childcare responsibilities with paid work. This negative effect is experienced by women in both the formal and informal sectors of the economy.
- Women are compelled to change their jobs to enable them combine paid work with domestic responsibilities more effectively. In the study, it was discovered that some women changed from working in the formal sector to more flexible informal sector jobs due to childcare concerns.
- In prioritising housework and childcare, women make less time available for paid work which negatively affects their earnings and income.

There is a nuanced relationship between women's relative earnings and decision-making on fertility issues.

- Women who earned more than their husbands often engaged in joint decision-making on childbirth, spacing and family planning.
- Some women who earned as much as their husbands sometimes had higher bargaining power. They initiated decisions and went ahead with their decisions without their husbands' support.
- Women who either earned more or less than their partners sometimes exercised their agency by enrolling on family planning programs without the knowledge of their partners. This suggests that earning differentials may not be the only important factor that determines women's fertility decisions. Women's agency is also critical.
- Norms and values that support women being submissive to their husbands and husbands being the head of the household determine the extent of women's bargaining power and their fertility outcomes. In rural communities where these norms and values tend to be binding, most women defer the decision on the number of children to have, child-spacing and accessing family planning to their husbands.

## Policy Recommendations

First, in view of the conflict between childcare responsibilities and paid employment, especially in the formal sector, there is the need for policy direction, spearheaded by the Ministry of Gender, Children and Social Protection to ensure that child day-care centers are provided in formal work environments. Similar provisions should be made for women in the informal sector by subsidizing childcare facilities. This provision will solve the childcare needs of working mothers to ensure that these women remain in less vulnerable employment.

The Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations together with the Ghana Employers' Association should be encouraged to work on modalities to provide more flexible working schedules, particularly for working mothers to enable mothers combine their domestic and childcare responsibilities more effectively.

The study has shown the need for a holistic approach to improving women's reproductive health outcomes. Gender equality and women's empowerment have the potential to give women a voice in decision-making. However, if cultural norms and values that define women's position and role in intra-household decision-making are not addressed, the gains of these interventions will not be realised in women's fertility outcomes, especially in rural communities.

## Limitations

Purposive sampling was used to select monogamous couples across five regions in the country. However, in Ghana, marriages can also be polygamous. Findings from the current study is, therefore, limited to monogamous couples.

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