

Gender attitudes and practices among married and cohabiting parents

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POLICY BRIEFING

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The number of couples who live together but are not married (cohabiting) has surged in the UK, and a new family type has been created: cohabiting couples with children. It is important to understand the differences between married and cohabiting families to form effective social policy. Knowing gender attitudes and practices helps understand gender inequality and social economic conditions among cohabiting and married parents.

We might expect that cohabiting couples are more modern in their attitudes compared with their married counterparts. Cohabiting women may be more likely to be in paid work and cohabiting men may be more likely to share housework duties. We might also expect that women in cohabiting partnerships are less willing to specialise in domestic work; cohabiters in the UK have fewer legal protections, especially upon separation, so specialisation in unpaid work at home might be seen as more risky for cohabiting women. In this briefing, we summarise our findings on the gender roles of cohabiting and married parents.

Key Points:

- *Cohabiting parents are less likely to be dual-earners than married parents.*
- *Cohabiting parents are less likely to earn equally than married parents.*
- *Both partners in cohabiting couples tend to have lower educational qualifications.*
- *Cohabiting and married parents are similar in the gender division of housework.*
- *Cohabiting fathers of young children have more liberal gender attitudes than married fathers.*

Introduction

According to the Office for National Statistics, cohabiting parents are the fastest growing family type in the UK, making up 18% of all families with dependent children in 2019. The increase in couples living together and having children without being married (non-marital childbearing) and declines in marriage are linked to individualistic and nonconformist values.

Previous research suggests that cohabiting couples may be socio-economically disadvantaged, therefore women's contribution to household income through paid work may be particularly vital. Also, cohabiting women may be more reluctant to specialise in domestic work because they have fewer legal protections if the couple separates (and statistically, cohabiting couples are at a higher risk of separation). We might expect, then, that cohabiting parents are more liberal in gender attitudes compared with married parents, splitting paid and unpaid work more equally between them. Our research uses the latest data to investigate these assumptions of gender attitudes and practices among cohabiting and married parents.

The study

To understand gender practices and attitudes among heterosexual married and cohabiting parents, we use couple data from the Understanding Society Survey (UKHLS) waves 4 and 8 (2012/13 and 2016/17). Since we expect gender specialisation to be more profound when children are young, all analyses are grouped by age of the youngest child in the household (having a child aged 0-5 and child aged 6-15). We use parents' current partnership status, so children in the household could have been born in the current union or a previous relationship. We use UKHLS cross-sectional weights to make the findings representative of the UK.

Main findings

Both cohabiting parents are less likely to be employed than married parents

When having a child under age five, cohabiting parents, compared to their married equivalents, are less likely to be in dual-earner families (Table 1). Instead, among cohabitators it is more likely that only one partner is employed.

When the youngest child is aged 6-15, the proportion of cohabiting parents who are dual-earners increases. The disadvantage remains, however, with more female breadwinner cohabiting families (8% vs 4%) and more cohabiting couples in which both are unemployed (9% vs 3%). Note that, although cohabiting couples are more likely

to separate or marry before the child is older, these figures suggest that cohabiting parents with older children are more likely to be socioeconomically disadvantaged.

	Youngest child age 0-5		Youngest child age 6-15	
	Married	Cohab	Married	Cohab
Both full-time	19.5	9.3	25.8	21.2
Fa full-time; Mo part-time	42	34.8	44.5	36.4
Fa part-time; Mo full-time	2.1	0.8	1.2	0.8
Both part-time	2.7	1.6	2.3	5.4
Father employed only	27.3	37	19	19
Mother employed only	2.6	5.1	4.3	8.0
Neither	3.9	11.4	2.9	9.3
N	1,233	327	1,312	198

Table 1. Couple's employment status composition by the age of the youngest child and partnership status, UKHLS wave 8, 2016-2017

Cohabiting parents are less likely to earn equally

In Figure 1, we investigate men's and women's contributions to household income between married and cohabiting couples.

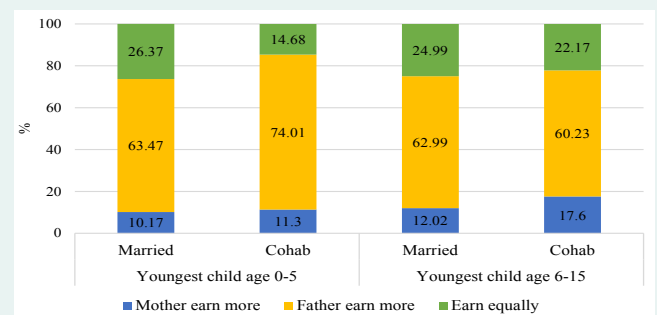


Figure 1: Couples' income composition by the age of the youngest child and partnership status, UKHLS wave 8, 2016-2017

The term "earn equally" refers to couples in which the woman's income from paid work is between 40%-60% of the couples' total labour income. "Men earn more" and "women earn more" indicates women's share of the household income from paid work is below 40% and above 60%, respectively. We find that cohabiting parents with a child under age five are less likely to earn equally; 15% compared to 26% for married couples. When the youngest child is aged 6-15, the proportion of couples earning equally increases and the gap between cohabitators and married couples reduces; the percentages are 22% and 25% respectively.

Both partners in cohabitation tend to have lower educational qualifications

We further investigate couples' educational attainment, which influences attitudes and practices of gender roles. For cohabiting parents with a child aged 0-5, 56% of couples both had low educational attainment, compared to 25% of their married counterparts. For couples who have a child aged 6-15, the figures are 46% and 33%, respectively. Note that, among cohabiting parents, only 17% are both high-educated. The lower level of education for cohabiting couples may explain why fewer are dual-earner households; lower education is associated with less stable and secure employment and more difficulties finding affordable childcare.

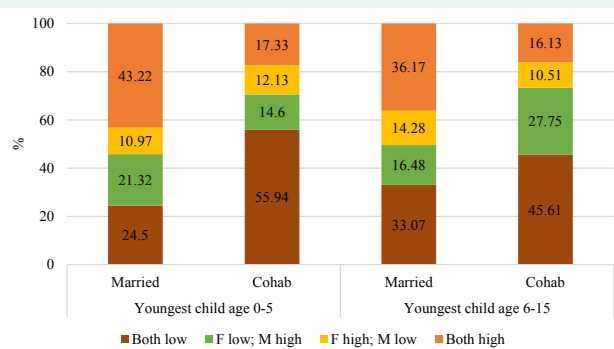


Figure 2: Couple's education composition by the age of the youngest child and partnership status, UKHLS wave 8, 2016-2017

Cohabiting and married parents are similar in the gender division of housework

Figure 3 presents weekly housework hours reported by mothers and fathers. Mothers, on average, spend twice as much time doing housework than fathers. However, the gender division in housework does not differ between cohabiting and married parents.

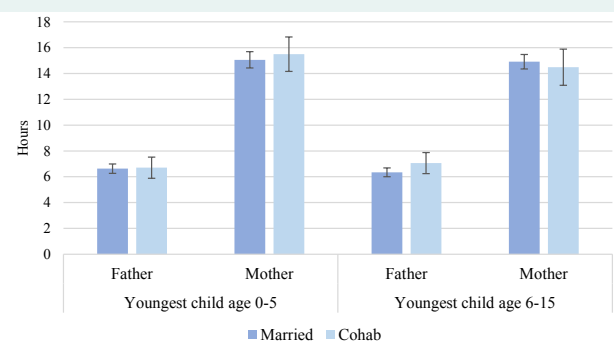


Figure 3: Men's and women's housework hours by the age of the youngest child and partnership status, UKHLS wave 8, 2016-2017

Cohabiting fathers have more liberal gender attitudes than married fathers

To measure the liberal attitudes we combined respondents' level of agreement with the statements on women's employment:

"Pre-school child suffers if mother works"

"Family suffers if mother works full-time"

"Husband should earn, wife should stay at home"¹

Higher scores indicate more liberal gender attitudes.

We found that married mothers are more liberal than married fathers, whilst there is no significant difference between cohabiting mothers and fathers (Figure 4).

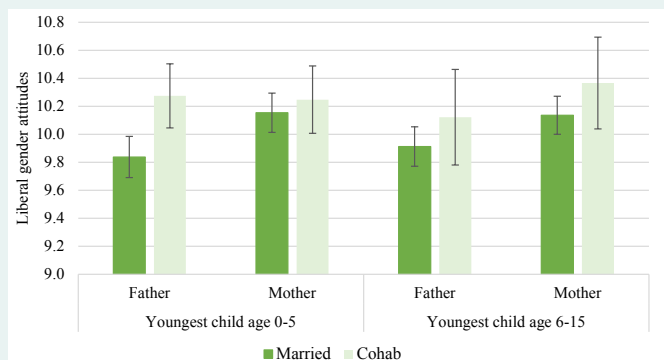


Figure 4: Attitudes towards women's employment by the age of the youngest child and partnership status, UKHLS wave 4, 2012-2013

Cohabiting fathers, particularly those who have younger children, have more liberal gender attitudes than married fathers. This is in-line with our finding that cohabiting couples have a higher proportion of female-breadwinner families or families where only the mother is employed, than married couples.

Cohabiting parents are less likely to both be employed and earning equally, yet, when compared with married parents, there is no difference in how they split housework within their couples. Cohabiting parents are as similar (or less equal) in dividing paid or unpaid work between the mother and father, despite their tendency to be more liberal in gender roles and attitudes than their married counterparts.

This implies that socioeconomic disadvantages may constrain the practical implementation of ideal gender roles, as prior research has pointed out.²

¹ The Cronbach's Alpha is 0.81. We do not include "husband and wife should contribute to household income" and "employers should help mothers combine jobs and childcare" since they have poor correlation.

² Usdansky, M.L. (2011), The Gender Equality Paradox: Class and Incongruity Between Work Family Attitudes and Behaviors. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*

Policy implications

Our research finds that cohabiting parents are less likely to be dual-earners or equal-earners. Cohabitors are also more likely to have low education. As the cost of raising children has increased, the findings indicate that children born in cohabiting families likely encounter socioeconomic disadvantages; there is a higher proportion of low-educated single-earner families where parents are cohabiting. The gender division of domestic labour in cohabiting relationships is similar to those in married couples, who normally tend to conform to conventional gender division of labour. Cohabitors, however, tend to be more liberal in their attitudes towards gender roles.

But it is likely that socioeconomic disadvantages hinder the practical application of their ideal gender roles, for example due to expensive childcare or unstable employment. There is also a higher possibility that cohabitators will experience relationship breakdowns. This means that specialising in gender roles may push cohabitators, particularly mothers, into further economic hardship because of periods spent out of the workforce.

Our findings show that both parents and children in cohabitation tend to have fewer resources. Policy makers, therefore, need to pay more attention to the rising number of cohabiting families with dependent children, formulating policies to aid and support them.

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