

Gender convergence in time use: The role of changes in living arrangements, 1980-2010

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Extended abstract

Background

Over the past decades, patterns of time allocation have changed dramatically in Western countries. Women's increased educational attainment and mass entry into the workforce give rise to a "gender revolution" (Goldscheider et al., 2015), fuelling a converge in how men and women allocate their time (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016; Sayer, 2015). However, this revolution has stalled (England, 2010), and notable gender differences in time use persist. Women have increased their time in paid work and reduced time in unpaid activities, while men have gradually taken on more unpaid work. Nonetheless, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of household responsibilities, resulting in a greater total workload (Kan et al., 2022) and less leisure time (Martinez Mendiola, 2025).

Parallel to these shifts in time allocations, Western countries have experienced demographic transformations that have shaped living arrangements across the life course. Rising life expectancy, declining fertility rates, and evolving cultural and social norms have influenced family dynamics and household composition. These changes have contributed to prolonged co-residence with parents, the nuclearization of households, increased solo living, and a rise in couples living alone, both in adulthood and later life (Esteve & Reher, 2024; Floridi & Esteve, 2024). Previous research on gender inequalities in time-use has acknowledged the importance of considering household characteristics, such as whether individual live alone, with a partner, or with young children (Anxo et al., 2011; Baxter et al., 2008; García-Román, 2024). However, no study to date has examined the extent to which changes in living arrangement in Western countries have contributed to the gender convergence in time use. This study aims to address this research gap.

Data and methods

This study draws on the Multinational Time Use Study (MTUS), an international harmonised database of national time use surveys from 1960 onward (Gershuny, Vega-Rapun & Lamote, 2020), all based 24-hour diaries with detailed information on household composition and socio-demographic characteristics. As the objective of the study is to examine changes over time, we selected seven countries with data at two points -one in the 1980s and another from the 2010s-: Finland (1987/2009), France (1985/2009), Italy (1989/2008), the Netherlands (1985/2005), Norway (1981/2010), the United Kingdom (1983/2014), and the United States (1985/2015). This selection enables the observation of trends over roughly 30 years.

The analytical sample includes individuals aged 18 to 80 who completed time diaries, capturing a broad range of living arrangements across the life course. The final sample includes data from 30,408 women and 26,518 men observed during the 1980s, and 41,180 women and 35,751 men observed in the 2010s, resulting in a total of 133,857 individuals and 209,824 diaries.

The primary dependent variables are time spent on paid work, unpaid work, and leisure. The main explanatory variables in this study are gender and living arrangements comprising nine categories: living alone; not living with a partner but with child(ren); couples alone; couples with one child; couples with two children; couples with three or more children; couples with children and others; couples with others; and a residual category others. This typology allows for a nuanced analysis of how living arrangements relate to time use across the life course.

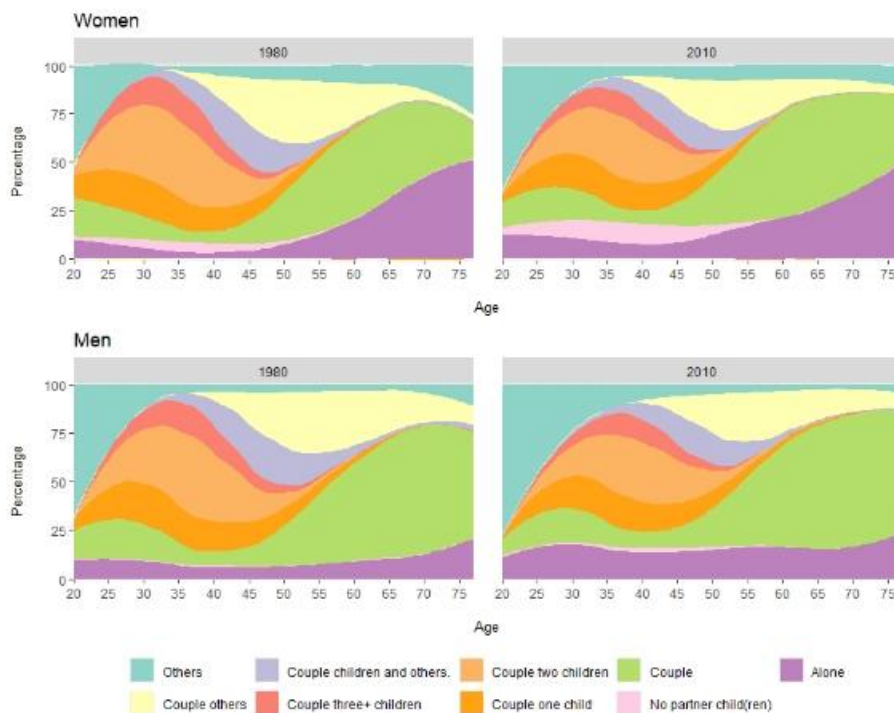
Analytical strategy

The analytical strategy unfolds in three main stages. First, we present descriptive analyses of gendered trends in time allocation to paid work, unpaid work, and leisure between the 1980s and 2010s. Second, we explore gender differences in time use across living arrangements by computing average time spent on selected activities, disaggregated by gender and period. To capture the life course dimension of household configurations, and acknowledging that the same living arrangement can have different implications depending on age, we split the categories living alone, couple alone, and living with others according to whether the respondent is younger or older than 40. Finally, we apply the Oaxaca-Blinder decomposition (Blinder, 1973; Oaxaca, 1973) to assess the extent to which changes in living arrangements explain shifts in men's and women's time use over the observed period.

Preliminary results

Preliminary results show significant shifts in living arrangements in Western countries between the 1980s and 2010s. Young adults increasingly delay leaving the parental home, live alone more often (especially men), and increasingly live with children without a partner (especially women). Couples with children, particularly two-child households, have declined. At older ages, women are more likely to live with a partner than in the past but still live more often alone than men, while extended family living (living with others) has declined.

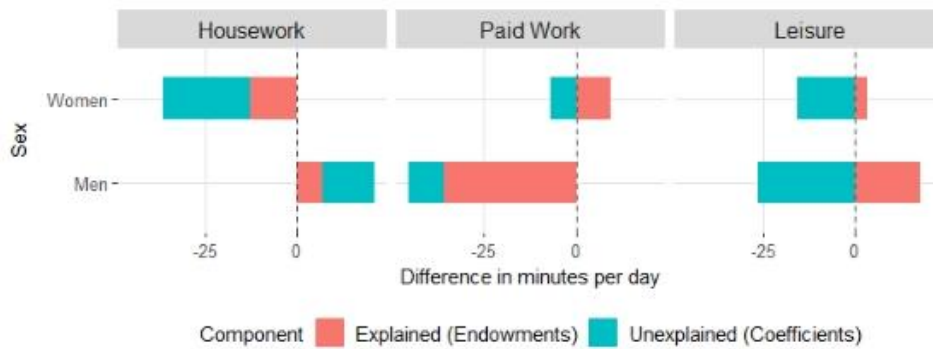
Figure 1. Changes in living arrangements between 1980 and 2010 by gender



Note: The graph is based on pooled data from a selection of countries using data from the MTUS.

The patterns of time allocation have also evolved leading to a gender convergence in paid and unpaid work. Our Oaxaca decomposition (Figure 2) highlights that these changes in time allocation are largely shape by compositional changes, with living arrangements playing a particularly important role.

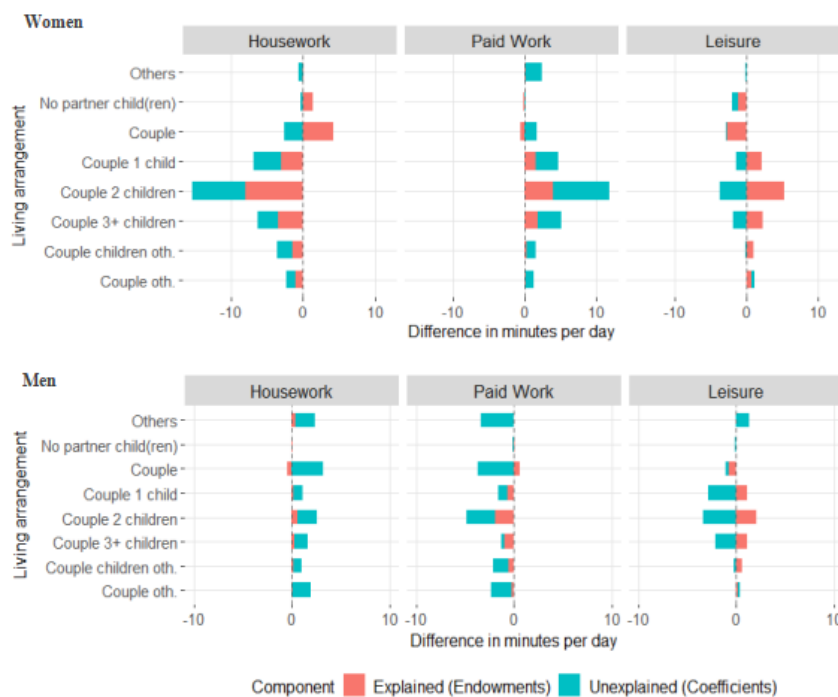
Figure 2. Decomposition of changes in time spent on selected activities by sex, total effects (twofold)



Note: The graph is based on pooled data from a selection of countries using data from the MTUS. The decomposition is based on the Oaxaca-Blinder method (Oaxaca, 1973). The explanatory variables included in the models are living arrangements, age, and country.

Specifically, changes in living arrangements reduce women’s housework by 12 minutes and increase paid work by 8 minutes, and leisure by 7, while for men they account for only a 1minute rise in housework, a 4-minute drop in paid work, and a 4-minute gain in leisure. The drop of couples coresiding with 2 children substantially explains the reallocation of women's time away from housework and towards other activities. Contrarily, increased time spent in couple relationships, especially at older ages, partially counteracts these effects. Changes in living arrangements have a mirror effect on men, but smaller in magnitude (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Decomposition by living arrangements of changes in time spent on selected activities by sex



Note: The graph is based on pooled data from a selection of countries using data from the MTUS.

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