

Extended Abstract – European Population Conference 2026

When Beliefs Meet Reality: Gender Attitudes, Division of Unpaid Work, and Satisfaction among Italian Couples

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Short abstract

This study investigates how gender-role attitudes influence the division of unpaid domestic and care work and how these dynamics relate to individual satisfaction with its division among Italian couples. It addresses two main questions: (1) do more egalitarian attitudinal profiles correspond to more balanced divisions of housework and childcare? and (2) are individuals in egalitarian couples more satisfied with these arrangements, or do higher expectations generate new forms of tension? Drawing on data from the forthcoming 2023 Italian Time Use Survey (ISTAT), the study develops a couple-level typology of gender attitudes based on responses to seven items on family and work roles. By linking attitudinal orientations, behavioural outcomes (i.e., observed patterns of housework and care), and satisfaction with the division of unpaid work, regression analyses explore the association between partners' gender attitudes alignment or mismatch and perceived fairness and well-being within couples.

Keywords:

Gender roles; domestic labour; childcare; time use; couples; Italy; satisfaction; gender attitudes

1. Introduction

Over the past decades, gender equality in Italy has made significant progress, particularly in the labour market. Nevertheless, persistent imbalances remain in the domestic sphere, where women continue to perform the majority of unpaid household and care work, even in dual-earner households (e.g., Zannella et al., 2019). These disparities are not merely economic, they can also affect well-being, relationship satisfaction, and family dynamics.

Recent surveys, including the Italian Time Use Survey (TUS, 2013–14), indicate that men rarely perform more domestic work than women, even when both partners work full-time (ISTAT, 2019). This pattern suggests that gendered norms and cultural attitudes continue to shape household behaviours. While structural factors such as employment status, education, and income clearly influence household labour allocation, cultural orientations—particularly gender-role attitudes—play a central role in determining how domestic and care tasks are divided (e.g., Magda et al., 2024). To our knowledge, no study has explicitly examined the link between subjective gender attitudes, the actual division of labour, and individual satisfaction with these arrangements.

The forthcoming 2023 Italian TUS, whose data will become publicly available in 2026, offers a unique opportunity to study these dynamics. This survey includes a rich module on gender attitudes, detailed time-use diaries, and questions on satisfaction with domestic arrangements, enabling a comprehensive analysis of attitudes, behaviours, and subjective well-being within couples.

2. Background

Research in Italy consistently documents persistent gender gaps in unpaid work. According to ISTAT (2019), women devote significantly more time to household and care tasks than men, even when both partners are employed. Campolo et al. (2007) demonstrated that couples' gender-attitude clusters influence the division of labour after childbirth, highlighting the role of cultural orientations in shaping household practices. Vargha et al. (2017) further underscore that Italy remains among the European countries with the largest gender gaps in unpaid domestic work.

International research similarly confirms a strong relationship between gender attitudes and household labour division. Hook (2010) finds that higher female employment and egalitarian contexts are associated with more equal divisions of housework, while Carlson et al. (2016) show that men's performance of child care is generally associated with more satisfaction with the division of child care, more satisfying sexual relationships, and higher quality relationships

Despite these contributions, most studies focus either on behavioural outcomes (e.g., time use) or subjective evaluations (e.g., satisfaction), rarely addressing both simultaneously. Moreover, few adopt a couple-level perspective that considers the joint configuration of partners' attitudes. This study aims to fill this gap by linking subjective gender attitudes, observed household behaviours, and satisfaction among Italian couples.

4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

RQ1: Do more egalitarian profiles correspond to more balanced divisions of domestic work?

H1: Couples with more egalitarian attitudes are expected to exhibit more symmetric patterns of domestic labour.

RQ2: Are individuals in egalitarian couples more satisfied with the division of domestic and care work?

H2: Satisfaction may vary by gender and couple type. Specifically:

- Women in egalitarian couples may report lower satisfaction due to higher expectations or negotiation tensions.
- Traditional couples may show greater inequality in domestic labour but not necessarily lower satisfaction, suggesting a normative alignment between attitudes and outcomes.

3. Data and methods

The empirical analysis relies on microdata from the 2023 Italian TUS conducted by ISTAT, expected to be publicly released in early 2026. Should these data not yet be available, the 2013 TUS will be used as an alternative source. Both editions provide detailed information on household composition, time-use diaries, and subjective evaluations of satisfaction with domestic and care arrangements, together with a rich module on gender-role attitudes. All household members complete a time diary and an individual questionnaire, enabling intra-family analyses..

The analysis is organized in two main parts. The first part involves the construction of a couple-level indicator of gender attitudes and a descriptive analysis of asymmetries within couples. Respondents were asked, on a four-point scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*, to express their level of agreement with the following seven statements: (1) *It is mainly the man who should provide for the family's economic needs*; (2) *In times of job scarcity, employers should give priority to men*

over women; (3) *In a couple where both partners work full time, household chores should be divided equally*; (4) *Men are less suited than women to doing housework*; (5) *Men should take a greater part in the care and education of children*; (6) *Fathers can take care of small children just as well as mothers*; (7) *A working mother can establish just as good a relationship with her children as a mother who does not work*. From these items, an index will be computed to summarize each respondent's gender-role orientation. Combining the individual scores of both partners allows the identification of three couple-level attitudinal types: *both egalitarian*, *mixed*, and *both traditional*. Sensitivity analyses will test whether the results are robust to alternative scoring procedures or typology definitions.

Second, the association between couple-level attitudes and individual satisfaction with the division of unpaid labour is modelled. The main outcome variable captures individual satisfaction with the division of unpaid labour within the couple—specifically, domestic chores for all couples and childcare for those with children. The key explanatory variable is the couple-level typology of gender attitudes, while additional controls account for employment arrangements (dual- versus single-earner households), presence of children (and age of the youngest child if present), use of paid services (e.g., babysitter, colf, etc.), informal help (e.g., grandparents, friends, etc.), geographical location, and socio-demographic characteristics such as age and education.

The empirical models will be estimated using mixed-effects ordinal logistic regression with random intercepts at the couple level. This approach appropriately handles the interdependence of partners' responses, capturing household-level unobserved heterogeneity while allowing for individual variation in satisfaction. As an alternative analytical strategy, the models may also be estimated separately for men and women to explore potential gender-specific patterns in the association between attitudes, division of labour, and satisfaction.

4. Preliminary findings on TUS 2013

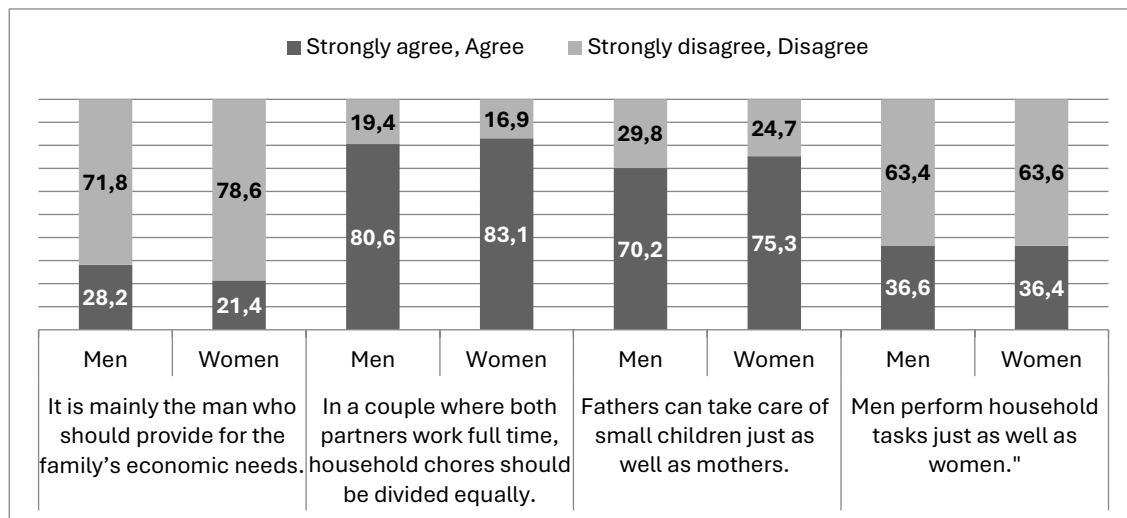
Since data for 2023 are not yet publicly available (scheduled for release in early 2026), this section presents preliminary descriptive findings based on the 2013 Italian Time Use Survey.

The 2013 data reveal nuanced gender attitudes in Italy (Figure 1)¹. While traditional views about men as the primary breadwinners persist—28.2% of men and 21.4% of women strongly or somewhat agree that “it is mainly the man who should provide for the family's economic needs”—there is broad support for egalitarian practices within the household. A large majority of both men (80.6%) and women (83.1%) agree that household chores should be equally divided when both partners work full-time. Similarly, most respondents endorse the idea that fathers can care for small children as competently as mothers (70.2% of men, 75.3% of women).

However, perceptions of men's actual performance in domestic tasks remain less positive: only about one-third of both men (36.6%) and women (36.4%) agree that “men perform household tasks just as well as women,” highlighting a gap between egalitarian ideals and perceived reality. Overall, these findings suggest that while Italian couples increasingly support gender equality in principle, cultural stereotypes and perceptions of competence may still shape household dynamics.

¹ The 2023 survey includes an expanded set of questions on gender attitudes (described in Section 4), allowing for a more detailed analysis of beliefs, behaviours, and satisfaction in household and childcare arrangements.

Figure 1 Italian Men's and Women's Gender Attitudes Toward Work, Household, and Childcare. Year 2013 (percentage values)



Source: Italian TUS 2013.

The Asymmetry Index shown in Table 1 measures the proportion of time spent on domestic tasks that is carried out by women. Overall, the data show that asymmetry is higher when only the man works, compared to when both partners work or in other arrangements.

Table 1 Asymmetry index in Unpaid domestic work in Italian Couples (with women aged between 24 and 65 years). Year 2013 (percentage values)

Asymmetry Index	Couples without Children			Couples with Children		
	Both work	Only men works	Other	Both work	Only men works	Other
Overall	68,10	80,50	66,70	69,40	81,50	69,40
Domestic chores	70,40	83,60	70,70	74,50	86,90	74,50
Childcare	.	.	.	62,70	74,50	63,90

Source: Italian TUS 2013. **Note:** The Asymmetry Index is the ratio of time spent on domestic and family care by women on the total time spent on domestic and family care by both partners, multiplied by 100.

For domestic chores, asymmetry is particularly pronounced: in childless couples, the index is 70.4% when both work and 83.6% when only the man works; in couples with children, it increases to 74.5% and 86.9%, respectively. This suggests that the presence of children exacerbates the unequal distribution of household tasks, even when both partners are employed. Regarding childcare, the asymmetry index for couples with children is 62.7% when both work, 74.5% when only the man works, and 63.9% for other arrangements. Although childcare remains more balanced than domestic chores, the pattern of greater imbalance when the woman does not work is consistent. In summary, household labour and childcare remain unevenly distributed, particularly when the woman does not participate in paid employment, and the presence of children increases domestic labour asymmetry.

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