

Parental Leave and Gender Gaps in Paid and Unpaid Work in Australia and the UK

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Introduction and Background

One of the most intractable forms of gender inequality is women's unequal responsibilities for unpaid domestic and care work, such as childcare, elder care, and "kin work" (maintaining family ties). This unrewarded and often unrecognised work continues to place constraints on women's ability to participate fully and effectively in public life. Gender inequalities at home flow into the public sphere by creating barriers and bottlenecks to women's employment and public participation, reinforcing gendered ideologies about women's and men's "natural" social roles. Without change in divisions of unpaid work and care, our capacity to move towards gender equality in public domains is very limited.

One way that governments and employers have tried to encourage egalitarian gender divisions of labour at home is to provide workplace policies that enable men and women to combine paid and unpaid work, including spending time at home with young children without losing their connections to employment. Considerable research has examined the effects of workplace entitlements such as flexible work hours, reduced work hours, working from home and parental leave time (Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Haas and Hwang, 2008). Such policies not only enable more flexible working arrangements that help balance the responsibilities of paid and unpaid work, but may also shift gender norms and cultural attitudes about how domestic and care work should be allocated between men and women whilst also providing economic incentives to take on domestic and care work. However, existing research shows mixed results: while some studies find that such policies foster greater male involvement in the home, others suggest they simply enable women to take on a "double shift," reinforcing rather than reducing gender inequality.

These mixed findings may reflect the wide variety of policies examined and methodological limitations in existing research. Many studies rely on cross-sectional data or focus solely on women's employment outcomes, often without distinguishing between domestic and care work or accounting for couple-level dynamics. Our study addresses these gaps by analysing time-use changes around the transition to parenthood using longitudinal couple-level data. We focus on how gender gaps in unpaid domestic work, caregiving, and paid labour evolve in the years before and after the birth of a first child, a critical life course transition that often intensifies gender inequality (Baxter et al., 2008; 2015). This is a period when work-family demands peak and the gendered division of labour becomes institutionalised. Importantly, we distinguish between domestic work and caregiving, which may respond to different social and policy pressures; men are more likely to participate in childcare than in housework, and these tasks differ significantly in meaning, expectations, and rewards.

Using longitudinal data from both partners in a couple across Australia and the UK, we estimate fixed-effects models that control for time-invariant unobserved heterogeneity and allow us to assess changes within couples over time. We also extend the analysis to examine how these trajectories differ by paternal leave uptake and household income level, testing whether these factors moderate the impact of parenthood on gendered divisions of labour. Comparing two policy contexts, Australia's minimal-wage government-funded leave scheme and the UK's employer-dependent entitlements, offers important insights into how institutional settings shape parental strategies and gender inequalities in the home.

Data and Method

This study adopts a life-course approach using harmonised longitudinal data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey and the combined British

Household Panel Study (BHPS) and UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS). The main analysis spans HILDA Waves 1–23 (2001–2023), BHPS Waves 10–18 (2000–2008), and UKHLS Waves 1–14 (2009–2022). For moderation analyses, we restrict to HILDA Waves 11–23 (after Australia’s 2011 Paid Parental Leave reform) and UKHLS Waves 1–14 (with consistent leave uptake measures).

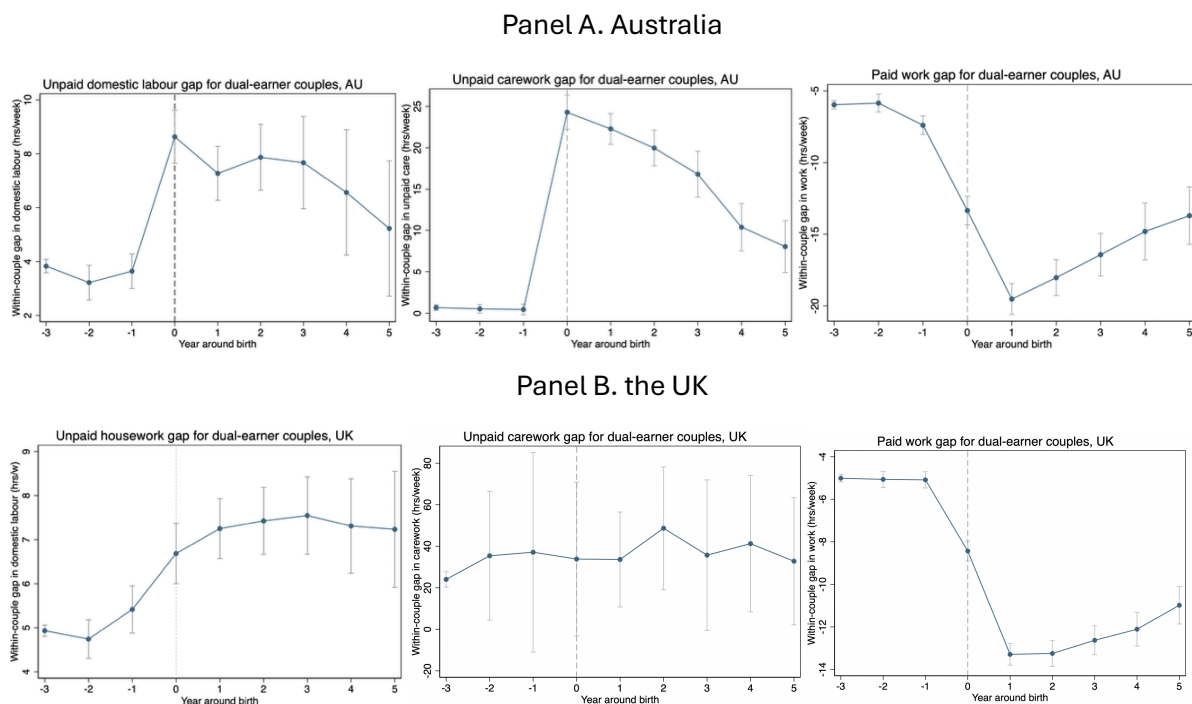
The analytical sample includes heterosexual dual-earner couples of typical childbearing ages (18–50 for women; 18–60 for men). We exclude individuals observed only once or with missing data on key variables. The final sample includes 2,812 couples in Australia (13,834 person-years) and 3,811 couples in the UK (17,663 person-years). We estimate within-couple gender gaps in weekly hours of domestic work, care work, and paid work, where positive values indicate women doing more. Event-study fixed-effects models track changes from three years before to five years after first birth. Models control for age, couple-level education, income share, couple-level gender attitudes, subjective well-being, and additional births. Interaction models examine moderation by (1) fathers’ leave uptake and (2) household income (above vs. below the wave-specific national equivalised median).

Key Results

The transition to parenthood substantially increases gender inequalities in time use across all domains. At baseline (–3 years), women already spend more time on domestic work than men (+4 hours/week in Australia; +5 hours in the UK). These gaps widen sharply after birth, peaking near +5 hours in Australia and +2 hours in the UK, and remain elevated five years later. Similar patterns emerge for care work in Australia, where the gap reaches +25 hours/week at birth and persists at +7 hours five years later. In contrast, UK care estimates are less consistent, likely due to categorical time-use reporting.

Paid work gaps also increase dramatically, particularly in the first-year post-birth. In Australia, mothers’ work hours fall by 13 hours/week ($\beta_{TP=1} = -12.56$, $p < .001$), and in the UK, by over 8 hours ($\beta_{TP=0} = -8.08$, $p < .001$). These gaps narrow slightly over time but do not return to pre-birth levels. Fathers’ paid hours remain stable, highlighting how parenthood reconfigures labour in gendered ways.

Figure 1: Changes in time use gender gap of parents or prospective parents

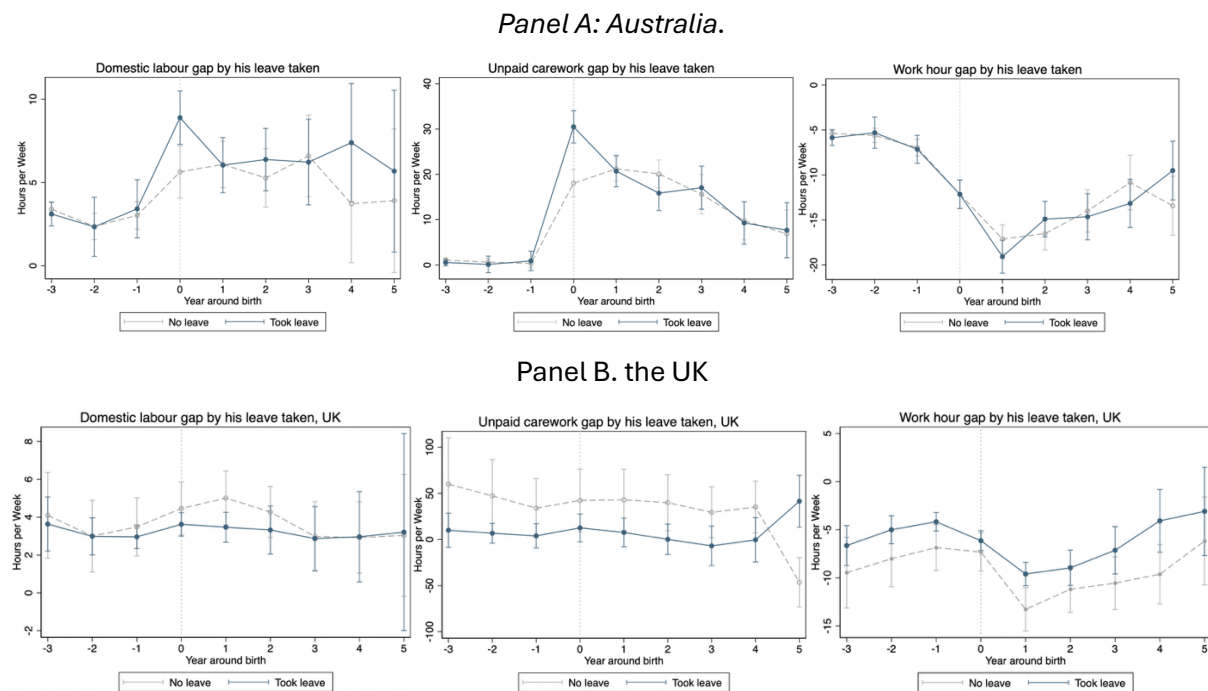


Sources: HILDA, waves 1–24; BHPS, waves 10–18; UKHLS, waves 1–14.

Notes: Estimates are derived from fixed-effects linear models with 95% confidence intervals. The sample includes heterosexual dual-earner couples transitioning to parenthood, observed from three years before to five years after the birth of their first child. Models adjust for the wife's age, couple-level education (1) both hold a degree; (2) mixed, he holds a degree; (3) mixed, she holds a degree; (4) neither holds a degree), income share, gender attitudes (a) both egalitarian, (b) mixed-he egalitarian and she traditional, or (d) mixed-she egal and he traditional), subjective well-being, and whether additional births occurred during the follow-up period. Positive values indicate that women perform more hours than their partners; negative values indicate the reverse.

To assess whether fathers' uptake of paid parental leave moderates gendered time-use patterns, we estimated interaction models by leave status. Contrary to expectations, results from Australia show that gender gaps in both unpaid domestic labour and care work were wider among couples where fathers took leave. For example, the gender care gap at birth reached +30.3 hours/week in leave-taking couples compared to +17.9 in non-leave-taking couples ($p < .001$), indicating that mothers in these households disproportionately increased their time. Although fathers who took leave did increase their own care involvement (e.g., $\beta_{TP=0} = 4.1$, $p < .001$), these gains were insufficient to offset the overall burden on mothers. A similar additive pattern appears for domestic labour and paid work. These findings suggest that Australian fathers' leave uptake may reflect higher caregiving needs, rather than a redistribution of tasks. In the UK, patterns more closely align with policy goals: while not always statistically significant, couples where fathers took leave showed narrower paid work gaps (e.g., -3.8 hrs/week in year 1, $p < .05$), suggesting modest egalitarian effects. However, interpretation of care work effects in the UK is limited by data quality issues.

Figure 2: Predicted within-couple gender gaps in time use by paternal leave uptake



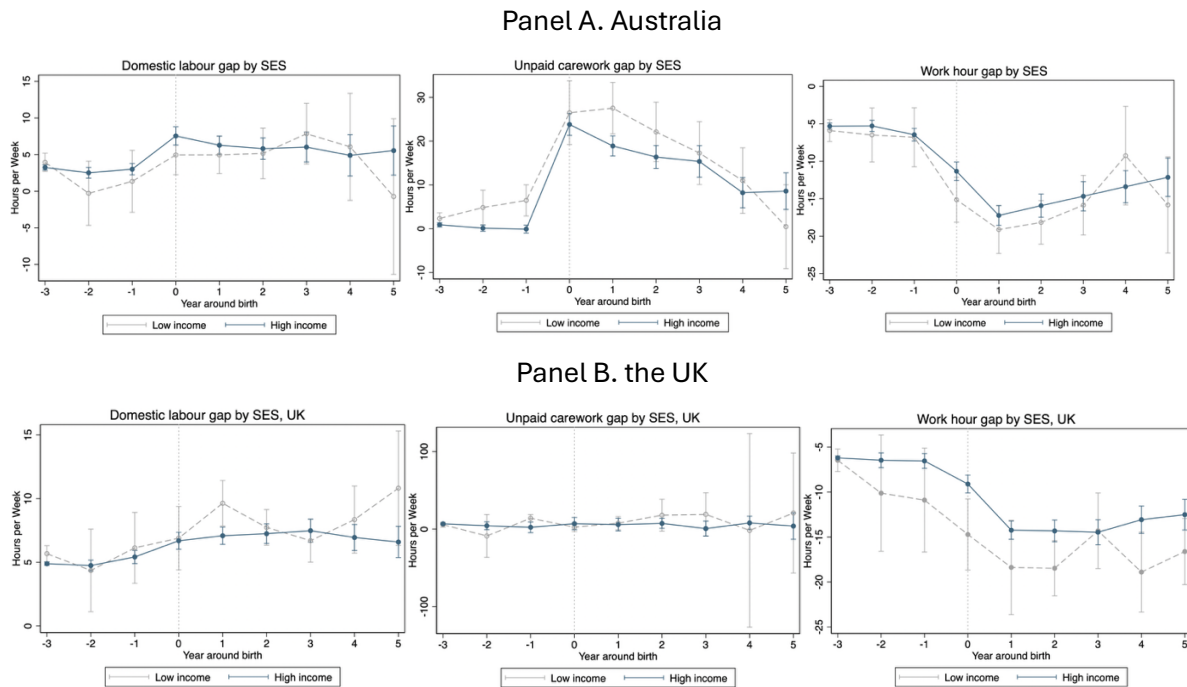
Sources: HILDA, waves 11–23. UKHLS, waves 1–14.

Notes: Predicted margins are derived from fixed-effects linear models with 95% confidence intervals, estimating within-couple gender gaps in time use around birth of the first child. Paternal leave uptake is coded as 1 if the father took one or more days of paid parental leave during the transition to parenthood.

To explore how economic resources shape gendered divisions of labour, we estimated interaction models by household income group (above vs. below the national median equivalised income). Results show that income moderates gender gaps most clearly in care work, particularly in Australia, where the care gap at birth is significantly larger in low-income households (+35.8 hrs/week) than in high-income ones (+23.7, $p < .01$). While domestic labour gaps widened in both

groups, low-income couples exhibited greater volatility, suggesting less flexibility in redistributing household tasks. Paid work gaps widened post-birth for all, but high-income couples showed a smaller and more stable divergence by year five. In the UK, income moderated paid work gaps more strongly: at childbirth, high-income couples exhibited a significantly smaller gap (-8.3 hrs/week) than their low-income counterparts (-12.3 hrs/week, $p < .001$). Domestic and care work patterns showed similar directions but were less statistically robust. Overall, these results highlight that socioeconomic resources moderate couples' ability to sustain equitable labour division during early parenthood.

Figure 3: Predicted within-couple gender gaps in time use by household income level, Australia.



Source: HILDA release 23; UKLHS wave 1-14

Note: Predicted margins are derived from fixed-effects linear models with 95% confidence intervals, showing within-couple gender gaps in time use by household income group (above vs. below the national median equivalised disposable household income).

Conclusions

This paper examines the effect of becoming a parent on domestic, care, and paid work time within dual-earner couples in Australia and the United Kingdom, with particular attention to how patterns vary by paternal leave uptake and household income. We find persistent and substantial gender gaps across all domains of time use, which widen sharply following the birth of a first child and remain elevated five years later. Contrary to expectations, fathers' uptake of paid parental leave in Australia is not associated with a redistribution of time within couples. Instead, it coincides with even greater increases in mothers' unpaid labour, suggesting that paternal leave uptake may reflect broader caregiving intensification rather than gender role reversal. In contrast, UK results show a modest narrowing of the paid work gap among leave-taking couples, though other effects are less pronounced. Additionally, income acts as a structural moderator: high-income households exhibit more stable and balanced time-use trajectories post-birth, while low-income couples experience larger and more volatile gender gaps, particularly in care and paid work. Together, these findings underscore that access to paid parental leave alone is insufficient to promote gender equality. Socioeconomic resources critically shape couples' capacity to manage care responsibilities and sustain egalitarian divisions of labour during the transition to parenthood.