

Till Chores Tear Us Apart: Perceived unfairness in household labor division and the risk of union dissolution among German couples

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Despite significant progress toward gender equality, women continue to shoulder a disproportionate share of unpaid labor and caregiving responsibilities. These disparities often deepen as partnerships become more institutionalized, particularly during major life transitions such as marriage or the arrival of children. Although previous research has widely examined the unequal division of household labor and its implications for relationship satisfaction, far less is known about how partners' perceptions of fairness within these arrangements shape the risk of separation.

Broader trends show a gradual gender convergence in time spent on domestic work (Kan et al., 2011), and the convergence of men's and women's roles constitutes a major social and economic achievement of the past century (Goldin, 2014). Yet gendered divisions of labor persist, indicating that progress toward genuine equality in caregiving and household responsibilities remains far from complete. In Germany's conservative and familialistic welfare state (Esping-Andersen, 1990, Seeleib-Kaiser, 2016), where the male breadwinner model continues to shape social and economic institutions, the division of paid and unpaid labor within heterosexual couples remains highly unequal. The Gender Care Gap stands at 44.3 percent, meaning that women spend on average 44.3 percent more time per day on unpaid care work than men — an equivalent of one hour and 19 minutes daily (Schäper et al., 2023). These patterns have tangible economic consequences: when paid and unpaid work are combined, women work more hours overall. However, because a substantial portion of this labor is unpaid, women have less time available for paid employment (Schäper et al., 2023), which in turn places them at a significant economic disadvantage both during and after separation (Kreyenfeld et al., 2023, 2025, Albrecht et al., 2022).

A large body of research on unpaid labor focuses on evaluating different measurement approaches, such as time-use diaries and stylized survey questions (Bonke, 2005), and on examining how these objective measures relate to relationship stability, satisfaction, or dissolution. For instance, Klumb et al. (2006) use time-diary data from German dual-earner couples to show that disparities in time spent on household tasks are negatively associated with relationship satisfaction, particularly when individual contributions are not socially recognized. Likewise, Cooke (2006) found a positive linear relationship between husbands' contributions to housework and relationship instability in West Germany.

While earlier research predominantly focused on the objective allocation of household tasks, recent studies underscore a crucial gap: understanding how subjective perceptions of fairness shape relationship outcomes (Gillespie et al., 2019, Koster et al., 2022). Time-use data can reveal how much time individuals devote to paid and unpaid activities, but it cannot capture whether those arrangements are experienced as fair or satisfactory by each partner. Even when the division of labor appears relatively balanced in objective terms, it is the **perceived** fairness of this arrangement that determines whether partners feel content or resentful regarding the overall labor division. A perceived imbalance, measured not by time but by one's sense of justice, can erode relationship satisfaction and, over time, contribute to separation.

Importantly, these perceptions are not neutral but inherently gendered. Empirical evidence suggests that women are more likely to articulate dissatisfaction through overt conflict, whereas men tend to respond by withdrawing or avoiding confrontation (Belsky et al., 1986, Hackel and Ruble, 1992). Furthermore, German data reveal systematic discrepancies in partners' reports of household labor contributions, indicating that men and women often construct distinct perceptions of the same division of labor (Naujoks, 2024). Such divergences underscore that analyses of household labor inequalities must move beyond

objective measures of time use to consider the interpretive and subjective frameworks through which partners make sense of their arrangements.

Theoretical background:

Economic models of the household, beginning with Becker’s *New Home Economics* (Becker, 1993), conceptualize domestic labor as the outcome of rational specialization aimed at maximizing household efficiency through comparative advantage. Within this framework, specialization is expected to promote union stability by fostering mutual dependence and shared welfare gains. However, the model assumes a unified household utility and cannot fully account for conflict or dissolution, predicting that separation becomes more likely only when the efficiency benefits of specialization decline, for instance when both partners’ labor market participation increases (Greenstein, 1996, Thielemans et al., 2021). Moreover, Becker’s framework fails to account for the post-separation consequences of specialization, as the partner that has specialized the most in unpaid work (often women), having accumulated fewer marketable skills and greater economic dependency, faces disproportionate disadvantages when unions dissolve (Ott, 1999, Albrecht et al., 2022). Later bargaining and resource exchange models (Manser and Brown, 1980, Lundberg and Pollak, 1994) shifted the focus from joint optimization to negotiation between self-interested partners, linking relationship stability to relative resources and bargaining power. In this view, dissolution occurs when negotiated outcomes cease to reflect each partner’s utility or when rising female economic independence strengthens fallback options, reducing tolerance for unequal arrangements (Cooke, 2006).

Sociological and feminist frameworks extend these models by emphasizing the subjective evaluation of fairness as a central determinant of relationship quality. Therefore, this study draws mainly on Equity Theory (Walster et al., 1978, Lively et al., 2008) and related research on distributive justice (Thompson, 1991), following the approach taken in previous studies addressing similar research questions, such as that of Klumb et al. (2006). This framework suggests that relationship satisfaction does not depend on absolute equality but on the perceived balance between partner’ contributions and rewards (Mikula, 1998). When this perceived balance is violated, often along gendered lines in which women report greater dissatisfaction (Belsky et al., 1986, Hackel and Ruble, 1992, Naujoks, 2024), conflict and instability become more likely. This shift from efficiency and bargaining toward fairness and perception reframes household labor not merely as an economic arrangement but as a negotiated, interpretively rich process. In this view, perceptions of justice are not peripheral, but constitutive of relationship dynamics, shaping whether inequalities are tolerated, negotiated, or ultimately lead to dissolution.

Hypotheses and Highlighted Mechanisms:

- **H1:** Greater perceived unfairness in the division of household labor increases the likelihood of union dissolution. The mechanism follows *Equity Theory*: subjective perceptions of unfairness, rather than actual task divisions, generate dissatisfaction that undermines relationship stability.
- **H2:** The effect of perceived unfairness on separation is stronger among *full-time employed women*, as employment enhances economic independence and reduces structural constraints to leaving unsatisfying unions. In contrast, women who are unemployed, homemakers, or part-time employed may remain in unequal relationships due to financial dependence.
- **H3:** Focusing specifically on *unpaid housework*, doing most of the household chores is more strongly associated with separation risk among full-time employed women. Economic independence heightens both awareness of domestic inequality and the ability to act on it, linking fairness perceptions directly to union dissolution.

Data and Methods:

The analysis draws on data from two major longitudinal studies on family dynamics in Germany: the *German Family Panel* (pairfam; Brüderl et al. (2024)) and the *German Family Demography Panel Study* (FReDA; Bujard et al. (2024)). The combined dataset enables the examination of relationship stability and dissolution across a large, diverse sample while maintaining high-quality longitudinal information on couple-level characteristics and perceptions. To the best of my knowledge, this study is one of the first to employ the integrated pairfam–FReDA dataset for longitudinal analysis.

The final analytical sample consists of 6,298 couples, of which 769 experienced a separation during the observation window. To ensure data quality and validity, the sample is restricted to couples with valid responses on the key perception variable, which captures subjective assessments relevant to the study’s focus. The method employed is *Cox Proportional Hazards Models*, a standard event-history analysis technique well-suited for examining the timing of separation events. The models estimate how various factors influence the hazard—or risk—of union dissolution¹ over time, while accounting for right-censoring, time-varying and constant covariates and differing durations of observation. By combining detailed panel data with robust event-history modelling, the analysis provides insights into the determinants of couple stability and separation in Germany.

The dependent variable in the analysis is the risk of *union dissolution*, measured as the occurrence and timing of separation between partners during the observation period. The first main explanatory variable captures the *perceived fairness of the division of labor*, asking respondents to evaluate how fair they consider the overall distribution of both paid and unpaid work between themselves and their partner. This measure aligns particularly well with Equity Theory, as it allows respondents to define both what constitutes fairness and what they regard as their “fair share” of paid and unpaid labor. This flexibility is advantageous, since individuals may differ in how they classify certain activities as unpaid work or not, as illustrated by Pulignano and Domecka (2025), who highlight the conceptual difficulty of defining unpaid labor. The second key variable captures the *actual division of labor* with respect to housework (chores), based on respondents’ self-assessments of whether they or their partners primarily perform these tasks. This variable is used only in the analysis of Hypothesis 3.

To enable event-history analysis, the data were reorganized into a *month–union format*, allowing the timing of separations to be analyzed with monthly precision. The final data frame consists of more than 350,000 months of union observations for female and male respondents, part of heterosexual unions².

Preliminary Findings:

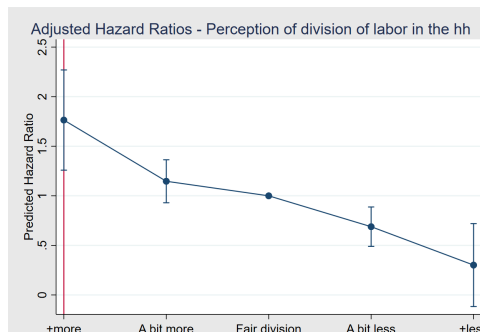


Figure 1: Adjusted Hazard Ratios – Perception of division of labor in the household

Figure 1 presents the results from a bivariate Cox proportional hazards model examining the association between individuals’ perception of the division of household labor and the risk of union dissolution. The predicted hazard ratios indicate a clear negative gradient: as respondents perceive the division of household labor as more unequal in favor of their partner, the risk of separation increases substantially. Those who report doing “much more” than their partner exhibit the highest hazard of separation, whereas individuals who perceive a fair division show the lowest risk. Although confidence intervals widen toward the extremes, reflecting smaller sample sizes in those categories, the overall trend remains consistent and statistically meaningful.

Preliminary multivariate results confirm this general pattern. Specifically, respondents who report doing “much more” of the household work (in terms of unpaid and paid work) face a significantly higher

¹Union dissolution refers in this study to separation of cohabitating couples (stable couples as pairfam and FREDA ask respondents to only include their relationships if they have lasted at least three months) and to divorce. I am aware there are important differences in legal and institutional frameworks that matter to this analysis and robustness checks look into the outcomes for both types of dissolution.

²For explanatory variables collected only every two years, values were carried forward to capture time-varying changes in the couple’s situation while maintaining continuity in the longitudinal structure of the data

risk of separation (HR=1.35***, 35% higher risk) compared to those perceiving an equal division, even after controlling for age at union formation, age differences, number of children, age of the youngest child, employment status and education of both partners, and household income.

Figure 2 presents the results from the multivariate Cox proportional hazards model testing Hypothesis 2, which examines the association between women’s perception of their share of overall household labor and the risk of union dissolution. To obtain more stable estimates, the categories “much more” and “more” were combined. The results indicate that women who report doing more than their fair share of total (paid and unpaid) household work and work full-time face a significantly higher risk (around 60% higher risk) of separation compared to those who perceive they do not do more than their fair share and do not work full time. As expected, couples living in higher-income households are less likely to separate, as are respondents who enter their unions at a later age compared to those who form partnerships earlier in life. These effects are both large and statistically significant. Preliminary results for Hypothesis 3, examining who performs most of the housework, show a very similar pattern.

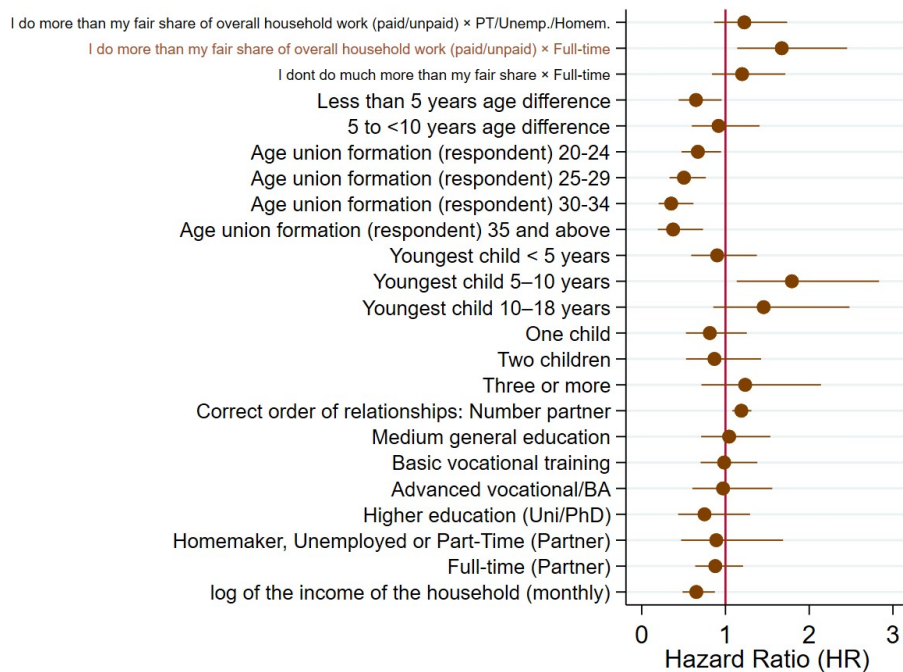


Figure 2: Preliminary results - Hypothesis 2

Overall, these preliminary findings underscore that perceptions of fairness in the division of household labor are a powerful determinant of union stability, revealing that how partners perceive the balance of domestic responsibilities can be as influential as their actual distribution. This highlights the role of subjective equity in shaping not only relational well-being but also the broader dynamics of economic independence and negotiation within couples. Moving forward, the analysis will be refined to more accurately capture men’s perceptions across different levels of work intensity, thereby improving the examination of gendered effects. Further extensions will integrate the role of socioeconomic status and life-course disadvantage in shaping family and partnership instability, while also accounting for potential anticipation effects among individuals who intend to separate and consequently report undertaking a disproportionately high share of unpaid work prior to separation.

To the best of my knowledge, this study is among the first to utilize the combined pairfam–FReDA dataset, offering a unique opportunity to conduct a high-quality longitudinal and contemporary analysis within the German context. Despite extensive research on the determinants of partnership stability, little is known about how perceptions of fairness influence separation dynamics. Addressing this gap, the present study incorporates subjective evaluations of fairness as predictors of separation. The preliminary findings are both substantively large and statistically significant, underscoring the importance of considering perceived fairness when analyzing union dissolution.

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