

The Sexual Division of Labor and Its Ramifications

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Introduction

The nuclear family is oftentimes hailed as a pillar of American society, despite its decrease in popularity during most recent years. While more diverse family structures have begun to emerge with increasing regularity, many conservatives continue to cling to the dream of the nuclear family and the traditional ideals it stands for. Amongst these various ideals exists the sexual division of labor, or the idea that certain everyday tasks can be coded as ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’. A traditional point of view concerning the sexual division of labor finds most home-oriented tasks, including cooking, cleaning, and child-rearing, falling on the shoulders of women. Meanwhile men are left to venture out into the public sphere and, through their employment, provide for and protect their families. This very idea is at its core rooted deeply in sexism and works to maintain a dangerous phallogentric belief system, in which women are kept from the public sphere and thus see their opportunities limited. While it is easiest to assess and condemn the traditional sexual division of labor through this gendered lens, as it undeniably harms the women subjected to it, this patriarchal tool also causes racial, economic, and sexuality-specific harms to a wide range of families everyday.

The Misogynistic Surface of The Sexual Division of Labor

The traditional sexual division of labor is viewed first and foremost as a women’s issue, as it is most commonly women who are forced to bear the weight of home-making and tending to their families. While this originates from a long-forgotten time in which it was the norm for families to have a male breadwinner and a female, stay-at-home mother, modern research illustrates that the division of housework does not shift significantly between the sexes when both spouses are employed full time. Many studies find that “wives’ employment leads to only a

very slight increase (1-2 hours per week) in husbands' housework time” and within those studies, there was little correlation between “egalitarian” attitudes within men whereas contributions to the home are considered and those contributions’ actual, practical effect (Brines 653). Even in households where husbands *say* they believe the division of homemaking should be equal, it rarely turns out to be that way in actuality and modern households are still ruled by archaic gender roles from the mid-twentieth century or earlier.

This unbalance has led to the idea of the second shift worked by women in the home, a phrase popularized by sociologist Arlie Hochschild. Hochschild very succinctly explains what the second shift entails in her groundbreaking article *The Second Shift: Working Parents and the Revolution at Home*: “[Women are] on duty at work. [They] come home, and [they’re] on duty. Then [they] come back to work and [they’re] on duty” (260). Women are expected to work the same traditional shifts as men before coming home and putting in an equal amount of time into their families. They are expected to be the cooks, the cleaners, and the parent ‘on duty’ during these hours while men are given passes to rest and relax following their grueling days at work. Much of this stems from misogynistic gender roles, which cast women as the more nurturing, caring, hands-on parents, but when one examines this phenomenon from a more structural, economic point of view, its intentions become much more sinister.

The sexual division of labor, particularly when functioning in its more traditional sense, is a thinly-veiled tool of oppression meant to control the women who are subjected to it. Women who face the brunt of homemaking face limitations within their jobs, including but limited to, “occupational aspirations”, “segregation by firm in rank”, and “impacts on status attainment” (Miller 243-47). In other words, women who care for their families a majority of the time are restricted in their ambition based on how much time and energy they are spending throughout

their second shift at home, and even if they move into the career of their choice they find themselves limited in their opportunities for promotion and advancement. Some of this surely stems from misogynist ideals against women being in charge, but it is also a fact that a man who does not spend every spare moment caring for others will likely be more rested, focused, and thus able to produce more efficient and quality work, systematically passing opportunities for advancement to men. This imbalance functions as the remains of the mid-twentieth century division of labor which attempts to exclude women from the public sphere, keeping them subordinate as they are forced to rely on their male partners for safety and security, never able to gain full independence.

Sexual Division of Labor and Black Women

While this critique of the traditional sexual division of labor is certainly valid, a more intersectional approach exposes even deeper, systematic issues with the structure as a whole. When one examines the sexual division of labor through the additional lens of race, issues with this structure become even more apparent - specifically, whereas the plights of Black women are concerned. Black women suffer significantly more than their white counterparts under the sexual division of labor, spending more combined time at work *and* working within the home. There are many reasons for this, most rooted in the discrimination that Black individuals face whereas employment and poverty are concerned. Black women are much more likely to be the “primary breadwinners or providers” within their own families than white women, and spend “significantly” more time at work despite not earning more (John 181, 189). They are oftentimes forced to bring in supplemental income to make up for the racial pay gap which persists in our country, which accounts for their additional hours within the workforce.

However, studies have found that housework and child reading are “gendered activit[ies]” for Black women, and thus they compensate for their careers by putting in additional hours within the home in order to produce gender for themselves and their families (John 188). Research shows that Black women are actually putting in additional hours at work *and* within the home, adding additional strain to their schedules and mental wellbeing. While studies have found that “work is more egalitarian among Black couples,” the difference is not entirely compensated for by the husbands (Kamo 188). Black men are indeed more likely than white men to spend time doing housework or with their children, and more likely to view household work as “part of their responsibility and not something to be traded off against hours spent in paid labor” as white men often do (John 189). This should theoretically help to take a portion of the burden off of their partners. However, because this work is a part of producing gender for Black women, the imbalance of the sexual division of labor is perpetuated.

It is obvious that in spite of additional help from their partners, Black women are still suffering a disproportionate amount under the traditional sexual division of labor, especially when compared to their white counterparts. This stems largely from Black women’s attempts to produce gender through participation in household work and homemaking, and this notion of producing gender and race are inexplicably tied; they are measuring gender by standards put forth by an overwhelmingly white society. Housework and homemaking as standards of gender were created by wealthy, white women who faced little-to-none structural racism or classism, and thus had a much easier time finding such economic success for their family that one parent had the ability to stay home and do the housework. Black women, who have had to endure much more structural racism (and, as a result of this racism, classist economic ramifications) should not feel pressured to measure their gender based on the same standards when they were not given

the same advantages; yet, research illustrates that this pressure is very real, and so Black women are made to suffer under the traditional sexual division of labor.

Market Versus Domestic: Sexual Division of Labor and The Economic Dependency Model

The sexual division of labor continues to cause harm from an economic standpoint. Capitalism is the backbone of today's society, and from this springs a hierarchy when it comes to the value of different types of work. "Market work" is viewed as work which is worthy of some sort of economical exchange; typically, a job that comes with a traditional salary (Perry 360). This type of work is typically seen as much more valuable than "domestic work", or any type of unpaid work which occurs within the home (360). The differing values are decided based on what each type of work earns; market work is exchanged for money, which can provide for a family, but domestic work does not have any inherent value of its own. Due to the perpetuation of traditional gender roles, it is generally understood that market work (i.e.: providing financially for the family) is the task of men, while domestic work (i.e.: caring for the family in the form of housework and homemaking) falls to women.

This expectation leads to a phenomenon known as the dependency model, explored by sociologist Julie Brines. She states rather simply that in these unions, "household labor is provided in return for economic support" (Brines 655). However, Brines separates this type of exchange from one typically found within a free labor market; because housework holds no real value outside of the relationship, unlike money or other resources, the imbalance of the worth of the two 'goods' per se gives way to an "unequal exchange relation between the two parties...and paves the way for exploitation" (Brines 656). It is this opportunity for exploitation which opens the door for harm, as the traditional sexual division of labor lends itself to the suppression of

women through the weaponization of resources. Women who are entirely dependent for food, shelter, and income find themselves economically at the mercy of their spouses. It creates a gaping power dynamic between the two; the breadwinning spouse is free to manipulate their dependent spouse however they please, because they are the ones providing for the union. This creates issues for the dependent spouse, as if they wish to leave the relationship it leaves them without a source of income to support themselves or any dependent children they may be bringing with them. This is particularly problematic when women are seeking to leave relationships due to threats to their mental, emotional, or even physical safety.

As mentioned earlier, the lack of market value associated with domestic work leaves the women with no real option should they begin to explore leaving their unions - thus, economically, the sexual division of labor feeds into the control of women. The structure of division of labor as it currently stands is a systematic tool used to keep women firmly under men's control and rule within their relationships, stripping them of their own economic agency. Services that could, theoretically, support women who seek to leave these unions while they attempt to establish themselves such as public assistance or welfare programs are often looked down upon, with the women who depend on them subjected to all sorts of stereotypes and hateful rhetoric. This leads Perry to note that it is acceptable for women to not be independent, "as long as that dependency is on a man" (361). Dependency on government programs that will eventually lead to their total independence from men is deemed unacceptable, shameful, and morally questionable. The sexual division of labor works to establish the domination of women by making them economically reliant on men, and complicating the process of leaving these unions based on this economic dependency.

Sexual Division of Labor and Queer Couples

Before one can even begin to consider how the sexual division of labor impacts queer couples, one must understand that LGBTQ+ relationships are severely underrepresented in academia covering this topic. It has been argued before that relationships of this nature are “not worthy of study” when it comes to division of labor or other familial topics, as these relationships have been posited as “as stigmatized, marginal alternatives” to heterosexual marriage and cohabitation (Oerton 422). Studies have gone as far as “ignor[ing] and exclud[ing]” LGBTQ+ groups entirely, leaving a gaping hole in this area of research which needs to be rectified (Sutphin 5). However, even in instances where LGBT+ relationships are considered, they are often studied in terms of how well these relationships subscribe to heterosexual standards of gender performance; that is to say, studies are interested in which members of these relationships take up the ‘masculine’ role of providing for the family, and who fulfills the ‘feminine’ role of homemaking and completing domestic labor. This framing of LGBTQ+ relationships is extremely problematic, as it once again centers heterosexual relationships as an established, ‘normal’ baseline from which queer relationships can be considered. This type of analysis is an “oversimplification that does not reflect the couple’s interpretation of their arrangement” (Kelly 451). The first transgression whereas the sexual division of labor and queer relationships are concerned does not even come from how they operate, but instead how they are talked about and stereotyped.

Once one looks at how queer couples actually handle division of labor within their relationships, it is clear to see that it differs vastly from how heterosexual couples treat the topic. Because there is no line of sex over which to divide the labor, same-sex couples tend to have a “genderempty” approach in which these issues are approached through an “exchanges,

calculations, and practicalities model” (Oerton 423). That is, these divisions of labor are based on other factors like preferences, time schedules, limitations of either skills or physicalities, and more. The division can be described as “more egalitarian...in comparison with heterosexual families,” and this can partly be attributed to the much more practical divisionary lines used in same-sex relationships (Sutphin 3). This is viewed as an opportunity to so-called “redo gender,” as couples challenge typical gender norms in a form of everyday dissidence to the heterosexual and patriarchal hegemony (Kelly 438). The division of labor as a whole within queer relationships is done based on time, resources, and preferences, which are much better and less arbitrary markers than one’s sex.

Though much research and even portrayal in media perpetuates harmful stereotypes whereas queer couples and the sexual division of labor are concerned, these queer couples actually have a much easier and healthier time managing it than their heterosexual counterparts. This is not to say that issues cannot still arise; there are couples who feel frustrated with the way domestic labor is divided in their relationship, whether that be because their partner does an unsatisfactory load or what are deemed to be easier tasks. Furthermore, the individual within each relationship who has more opportunities and resources at work to earn the higher wage still does often bear less of the brunt within the home, which once again moves to create a queered version of the economic dependency model stated above. However, on the whole, many of the patriarchal issues with the sexual division of labor seem to not be present within LGBT+ relationships, leading to a more balanced division.

Conclusion

It is easy to simply pass off the sexual division of labor as a misogynistic tool, but one would be remiss to not also consider its racist, classist, and homophobic implications. While it did originate as a force with which to oppress women and confine them to the home, its harm is much more widespread in the modern day as relationships continue to change in appearance. The sexual division of labor puts great strain on Black women as they partake in housework they do not have time to manage alone, all in an effort to conform to white, middle-class standards of what gender and, in particular, womanhood should look like. The sexual division of labor also has economic implications, as the dependency model demonstrates that such divisions often lead one party being solely dependent on the other for food and shelter; this opens the door for manipulation and control within the relationship. Finally, while LGBT+ couples on the whole divide domestic labor in a much more sensible and practical manner than their heterosexual counterparts, they suffer from gender stereotypes which arise from the traditional division of labor based on sex and face discrimination and exclusion from academia when topics such as this arise. It is clear that the sexual division of labor creates a host of problems for those of many different identities, and in the end serves nobody well except for the white, patriarchal hands which crafted it.

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