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American Association of University Professors

Housework Is an Academic Issue

How to keep talented women scientists in the lab, where they belong.

By Londa Schiebinger and Shannon K. Gilmartin

Scientists are likely not to be interested in thinking about housework. Since René Descartes, Western culture has stringently separated matters of mind from body. Housework is, however, related to the life of the mind. Scientists wear clean clothes to the lab (at least from time to time), eat food procured and prepared by someone, and live in reasonably clean houses. This labor used to be done by stay-at-home wives. The single-earner wage of the 1950s, for example, covered the cost of unpaid services that wives performed. Now, housework is often done by wives and partners who are also full-time professionals—and the women we discuss in this study are scientists at thirteen of the top research universities in the United States.

Findings from our study, based on data collected in 2006–07, show that despite women’s considerable gains in science in recent decades, female scientists do nearly twice as much housework as their male counterparts. Partnered women scientists at places like Stanford University do 54 percent of the cooking, cleaning, and laundry in their households; partnered men scientists do just 28 percent. This translates to more than ten hours a week for women— in addition to the nearly sixty hours a week they are already working as scientists—and to just five hours for men. When the call came from Stockholm early one October morning, Nobel Prize– winner Carol W. Greider was not working in her lab or sleeping. She was doing laundry. She is far from alone. Highly talented women scientists are investing substantial time in housework.

These findings have important policy implications. Over the past three decades, governments, universities, and industries have dedicated often robust resources to efforts to increase the number of women scientists—and yet progress in attracting more women to science has stalled. The 2009 National Academies report *Gender Differences at Critical Transitions* stresses that research must explore “gender differences in the obligations outside of professional responsibilities” in order to understand women’s career choices and outcomes more fully.

In this study, we zero in on the obligation of household labor. We analyze the division of household labor in scientists' homes and their strategies to lighten the household load in order to maintain highly productive careers. We argue that work done in the home is very much an academic issue—not peripheral in any way to scientists' professional lives. Understanding how housework relates to women's careers is one new piece in the puzzle of how to attract more women to science.

Our policy recommendation provides a new solution to one key aspect of balancing life and work. We propose that employers provide benefits to support housework. Many universities already offer retirement, health-care, and child-care supplements; some even support housing and tuition benefits. We recommend that institutions provide a package of flexible benefits that employees can customize to support aspects of their private lives in ways that save time and enhance professional productivity. Institutions need to think of housework benefits as part of the structural cost of doing business. With lab costs running into the millions of dollars, supporting the human resource involved—scientists' ability to be more productive—takes full advantage of investments in space and equipment.

This policy recommendation hinges on the principle that outsourced household labor must be professionalized responsibly—with competitive wages and health-care, family-care, and retirement benefits—and that employers must conduct due diligence on the household service providers with whom they contract. As political scientists John Bowman and Alyson Cole have noted in a recent article in *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, “Do Working Mothers Oppress Other Women?” employing others to perform housework is subject to much political, legal, and sociological debate, even in gender-progressive countries like Sweden. “Rather than blaming women who hire housecleaners,” they write, “progressives should aim instead at elevating the status of this labor.” They argue that commodifying household labor helps to reduce illegal employment in domestic services and create real, properly compensated jobs; it also helps to end working women's double shifts and advance gender equality in the home.

But current cultural struggles about who exactly should be doing the housework go well beyond concerns about equality for women. The United States faces global competition in science, while at the same time highly trained women scientists at top research universities invest talent, time, and energy managing households. Is this a use of resources that we can afford? Are there ways that universities might better capture the talents of women scientists for science?

Who Does What?

This article draws on the rich data collected in the Managing Academic Careers Survey, administered by Stanford University's Michelle R. Clayman Institute for Gender Research to full-time faculty at thirteen leading research universities across the United States. Our larger report, *Dual-Career Academic Couples: What Universities Need to Know*, provides details about sampling and survey methodology. Here, we focus on the 1,222 tenured and tenure-track faculty respondents in the natural sciences who indicated that they are partnered with someone of the other sex (910 men and 312 women). While we collected data for same-sex couples, the number of scientists with samesex partners is too small for extensive quantitative analysis. Previous literature suggests that same-sex couples may have more egalitarian divisions of labor relative to their heterosexual peers; this topic, along with issues of household labor for faculty members who are single, is worthy of future research.

Among several survey items relating to partnerships and households, respondents were asked to report their percent share, their partner's percent share, and "paid help/other's" percent share of seven household tasks, parenting, and elder care. Findings indicate that scientists' homes reflect a traditional division of domestic labor. Women scientists at elite research universities, like most women across the United States, continue to do the lion's share of housework ([figure 1](#)). Their share of core household tasks (defined as cooking and grocery shopping, laundry, and housecleaning) is almost double that of men scientists (54 percent versus 28 percent). These tasks exhaust nearly twenty hours a week (as compared with four to five hours a week for more periodic tasks like yard and car care, house repair, and finances), meaning that women take on a significantly larger share of the most time-intensive jobs.¹ Men and women also employ others to help with household labor, a point to which we return below.

We examined variations in household labor by partner's employment status ([figure 2](#)). It comes as no surprise that men scientists with stay-at-home partners do the least core household labor in our study. It is part of the current social contract that stay-at-home wives do the majority (76 percent) of core domestic work. Only thirteen women scientists in our sample have a stay-at-home partner; while these women take on proportionately less work than their partners, they still assume a greater share of core tasks than do most men scientists.

Does the division of household labor vary between academic couples (where both partners are academics—and in this sample at least one is a scientist) and other dual-career couples (where one partner is a scientist and one is employed outside the home)? We found few differences between these households. In the main, the woman does substantially more work than her male partner, regardless of the type of couple.

Interestingly, men scientists with academic partners have found their way into the kitchen and currently take on 41 percent of cooking and grocery shopping (figure 2). Academic couples have among the more equitable divisions of cooking labor across all groups. Men scientists with employed, nonacademic partners do only 33 percent of their household cooking, whereas women scientists in those relationships do 61 percent.

While still not taking on a full half of cooking responsibilities, men contribute significantly more here than they do to other core housework tasks. This is important because cooking and its attendant duties are estimated to consume about nine hours a week—and up, depending on the demands of gourmet palates.

Women also assume a disproportionate share of child and elder care. In our sample, women scientists do 54 percent of parenting labor in their households, and men scientists do 36 percent (“parenting labor” refers to physical, psychosocial, and intellectual responsibilities). The extra hours women put in have real consequences for their careers. As Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden have shown in their much cited 2002 *Academe* article, “Do Babies Matter?” women who have children within five years of receiving their doctorate are less likely to achieve tenure than are men with “early babies.”

Generational Patterns

What about generational issues? Are young men doing more household work? Our data show little generational variation. Across all ranks, women scientists in dual-career couples perform more core housework than do similarly situated men scientists (figure 3). Men assistant professors take on significantly more core housework than do men full professors (35 percent versus 28 percent), but this still falls well below that of their female partners (at 59 percent, with the 4 percent balance for these couples assigned to “paid help/other”). The persistence of these gender differences across rank is consistent with research showing that girls do more housework than boys even at a very young age.

Professional Hours Worked

The issue of domestic labor is directly related to the question of how many hours people work professionally. In our survey, we asked an “hours worked” question in part to test former Harvard University president Lawrence H. Summers’s notion that “high powered” faculty work professionally eighty hours a week. We asked, “How many hours per week on average do you work?” recognizing that at times people have push periods where they may work eleven to fifteen hours a day.

Our findings show that very few scientists—thirty-four men and eighteen women (4 percent of our sample)—work the Summers eighty-plus-hour week ([figure 4](#)). People who work eighty hours a week are on the job 11.4 hours a day, seven days a week (hours are self-reported). One wonders about the potential to sustain these schedules over a professional lifetime.

Partnered science faculty in our sample average nearly sixty hours a week at work. Men and women scientists log the same number of hours (mean hours for men is 56.4, mean for women 56.3, and standard deviations—about 11—are the same as well). Up to sixty hours of concentrated work a week (and not just hours spent away from home) over the long haul requires tremendous commitment. And as one senior chemist in our survey remarked, working long hours does not necessarily foster creativity.

Hiring Household Help

Our study also reveals an important strategy women deploy to manage household labor and remain scientifically productive: “outsourcing,” or employing others to help with this work. At each rank, women scientists outsource twice as much core housework as do men scientists ([figure 3](#)). Despite significantly lower salaries, women assistant professors outsource the same proportion of housework as men full professors. Senior-ranking women outsource 20 percent of their basic housework. For these women, employing others to assist with housework does not equalize divisions of labor, but it does somewhat lighten their share, and it shaves off almost four hours from the total weekly household load. Housecleaning is subcontracted to third parties more than any other core household task ([figure 1](#)).

Interestingly, our data suggest that employing others to help with core housework is characteristic of highly productive science faculty (where productivity is defined as total self-reported number of published articles over one’s career) even after rank, gender, salary, and one’s own share of labor are controlled (analysis was

limited to scientists in dual-career partnerships). This is true for both women and men—we often find that practices that are good for women’s careers also assist men in reaching their career goals.

Nearly sixty-hour workweeks, combined with a disproportionate share of household labor and child care, make young women think twice about careers in academic science. As Mason and Goulden put it in their 2004 *Academe* article, “Do Babies Matter? (Part II),” “this model is not very attractive for women who hope to succeed in academia.” Indeed, their recent research indicates that women PhDs turn away from academic science because they face a culture that precludes time and responsibility for home, family, and life. Considering the cost of training PhD scientists, this is an expensive proposition for science and society.

The Stalled Revolution

U.S. society has witnessed “half of a revolution” with respect to women. Women have entered the workforce in large numbers; they have entered the sciences, become university professors, deans, and presidents—this latter in rather astonishing proportions (half of the presidents of Ivy League universities currently are women). The public world is changing, pushed forward by legislation and institutional action. The private world of the home, however, remains largely mired in tradition. In *The Mind Has No Sex?* Londa Schiebinger has documented how the workplace separated and became distinct from the domestic sphere in Western societies only about two hundred years ago and how this separation undergirded the exclusion of women from modern universities and professional life more generally. These divides are historical and can be changed.

For more than forty years, women in the United States have struggled to create equality in the home. Women’s strategy has been to get men to assume their responsibilities and do their fair share. Some, like the sociologist Arlie Hochschild in her 1975 *Second Shift*, argue the need for men’s participation in terms of equality of burdens and responsibilities. Others, like Sharon Meers and Joanne Strober in their 2009 *Getting to 50/50*, argue for this in terms of the pleasure of full participation in private life. And nationally, men are doing more. Suzanne Bianchi, John Robinson, and Melissa Wilkie have shown in their 2006 *Changing Rhythms of American Family Life* that almost 70 percent of married fathers today report doing housework, versus 54.4 percent in 1965; married men now take on 33.3 percent of household labor, versus 11.3 percent in the 1960s.

But men are still not taking their full share of responsibility. Our larger study of the U.S. academic workforce reveals one reason why. While men professors in our crossdiscipline sample (that is, faculty overall, not just scientists) report giving personal goals priority over professional ones at a slightly higher rate than women (22 percent versus 19 percent), they also report giving their own careers higher priority than those of their partners. In response to the survey question, “In your relationship, whose career is considered primary?” half of men in academic couples marked “mine,” compared with only 20 percent of women. The majority of women marked that each partner’s career is “equal” (59 percent versus 45 percent of men). Economist Robert Drago and higher education specialist Carol Colbeck’s “The Mapping Project: Exploring the Terrain of U.S. Colleges and Universities for Faculty and Families” shows that when men value their careers over their partners’, women academics tend to comply, all too often recalibrating their career goals to facilitate those of their husbands.

What Institutions Can Do

Universities have developed over the past two hundred years to fit men’s lives, both as faculty members and as students. From the nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, university professors were predominantly men—with stay-at-home wives who organized and cared for the household. As women have entered universities, in large numbers since the 1970s, both as students and as faculty members, universities are slowly being remade also to fit women’s lives. Many reforms have focused, for example, on policies for family leave, stopping the tenure clock, providing child care, and the like. These measures, however, remain insufficient.

Our policy recommendation provides a solution to one key aspect of balancing work and life. We propose that institutions extend their current benefits program to support assistance with household labor. Few universities to date have looked at reforms related to housework. U.S. employers tend to provide specific benefits for health care, day care, and sometimes even housing and college tuition. We recommend that institutions offer instead a “cafeteria” or “flexstyle” benefits plan from which employees could tailor a package to meet their particular needs (retirement benefits should remain as they are now, fixed and not optional).

Employee needs can change over the course of a lifetime. Younger people, for example, may need assistance with household labor when salaries are low. Those who have children may choose to put resources into child

care and later into college tuition. Some employees may need help with elder care. A flexible benefits package—providing a specific yearly dollar amount—could be used for any aspect of private life that saves employee time and hence enhances productivity. One appealing aspect of this benefit proposal is its inclusivity—one need not be partnered or have children to gain access to the full range of services under its umbrella.

To our knowledge, U.S. employers generally do not provide a benefit to assist with housework. Some non-U.S. companies, such as Sony Ericsson in Sweden, do. There, the company pays for housecleaning from select service providers. The Swedish government is currently experimenting with tax relief on domestic services, believing that, despite initial costs, Sweden will benefit in the long run by creating new jobs and reducing illegal employment and exploitation in services for cleaning, gardening, and cooking. In the United States, the effort to provide benefits for domestic labor revalues housework that has never been represented in the nation's gross domestic product. Housework has been invisible labor carried out by women behind closed doors and often in the wee hours of the morning. This work needs to be lifted out of the private sphere of the family and put onto the national grid. The United States needs to capture the talents of its female scientific workforce for science.

Given the recent economic downturn, we understand that this may not be the right time to argue for expanding employee benefits. Our proposal, however, addresses longterm problems and long-term solutions. Providing benefits to support housework continues dominant social trends of the past forty years: U.S. institutions have stepped into the domestic sphere to support aspects of private life, from health-care benefits to child-care supplements. Institutions now need to step in to support housework.

Note

We thank Shelley Correll, Paula England, Patricia Jones, Dan Ryan, and Myra Strober for their comments on this essay. We thank the Michelle R. Clayman Institute at Stanford University for funding for this project.

1. Household hour estimates for this study are derived from Mary Ann Mason and Marc Goulden, "Do Babies Matter (Part II)? Closing the Baby Gap," *Academe* 90 (November–December 2004): 10–15; and the 2007 American Time Use Survey (http://www.bls.gov/tus/tables/a1_2007.pdf). Using Mason and Goulden's data,

we calculate that a two-person academic household devotes approximately twenty-four hours a week to housework. Seven household tasks in our "Managing Academic Careers" survey (see figure 1) are then distributed across these twenty-four hours; tasks were roughly weighted according to American Time Use Survey daily estimates for each.

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Comments:

Dear Editor:

I just finished the interesting article on housework, women, and science by Londa Schiebinger and Shannon K. Gilmartin. As a female junior faculty member at a research university, I am surprised to find my situation not represented in that article at all. I am a single parent (divorced). I do all the housework--100%, and earn all the income for my family--again 100%. I have two pre-teens, one still in afterschool care. That means I can't afford household help.

I didn't see single, custodial parents noted in the article at all. I am the only one I know in my department. If there are others at my university, I have yet to meet them. Certainly, I can't be the only one in the country.

Can I?

I hope Drs. Schiebinger and Gilmartin will consider others like me in their next article. Even if it's only to note our absence.

K. K.

Dear Editor,

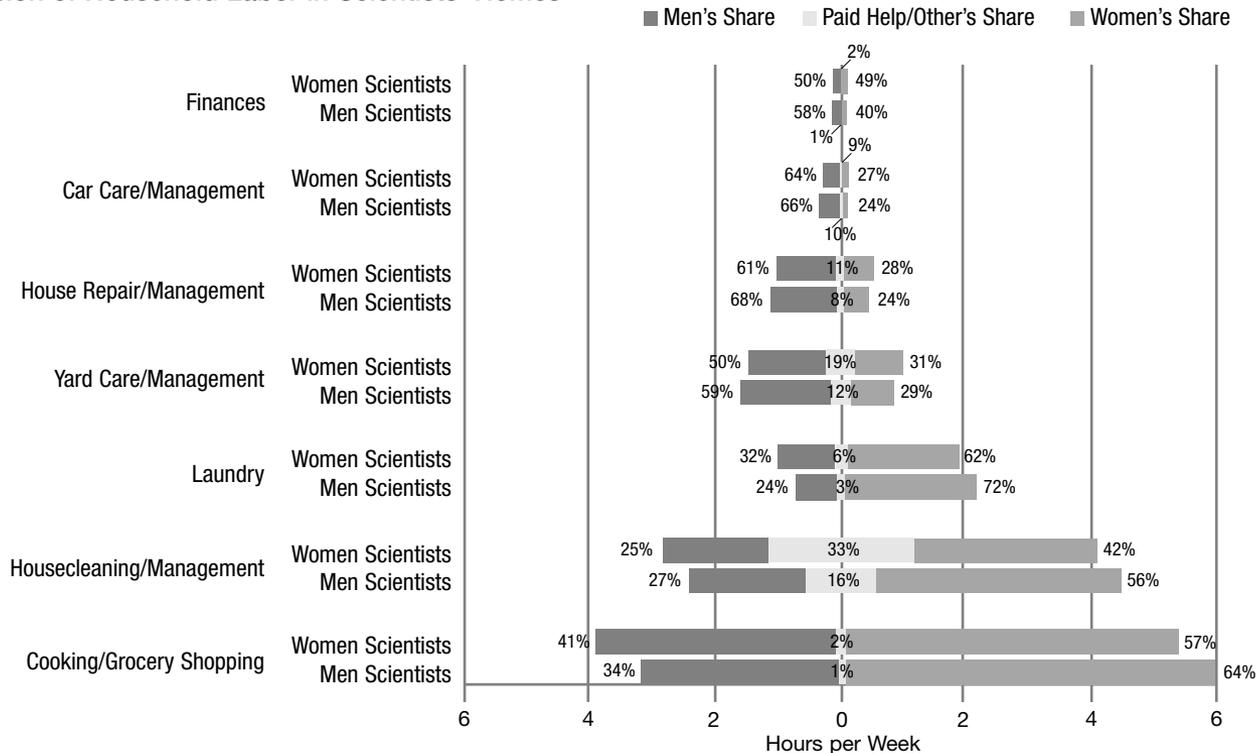
As a psychoanalyst who has worked extensively on the conflicts women experience when they balance work outside the home and work as a mother, I read "Housework is an academic issue" with great interest.

The article omits discussion of a very important issue: the difference between men and women towards rearing children and by extension taking care of their families and household. As a result of this difference, there is much greater ambivalence among women than men when it comes to making choices between housework and academic work.

In addition to concrete help such as the "cafeteria menu" proposed in the article, helping mothers accept their ambivalences and cope with the resultant stresses can go a long way to help propel the academic careers of mothers.

L.H.

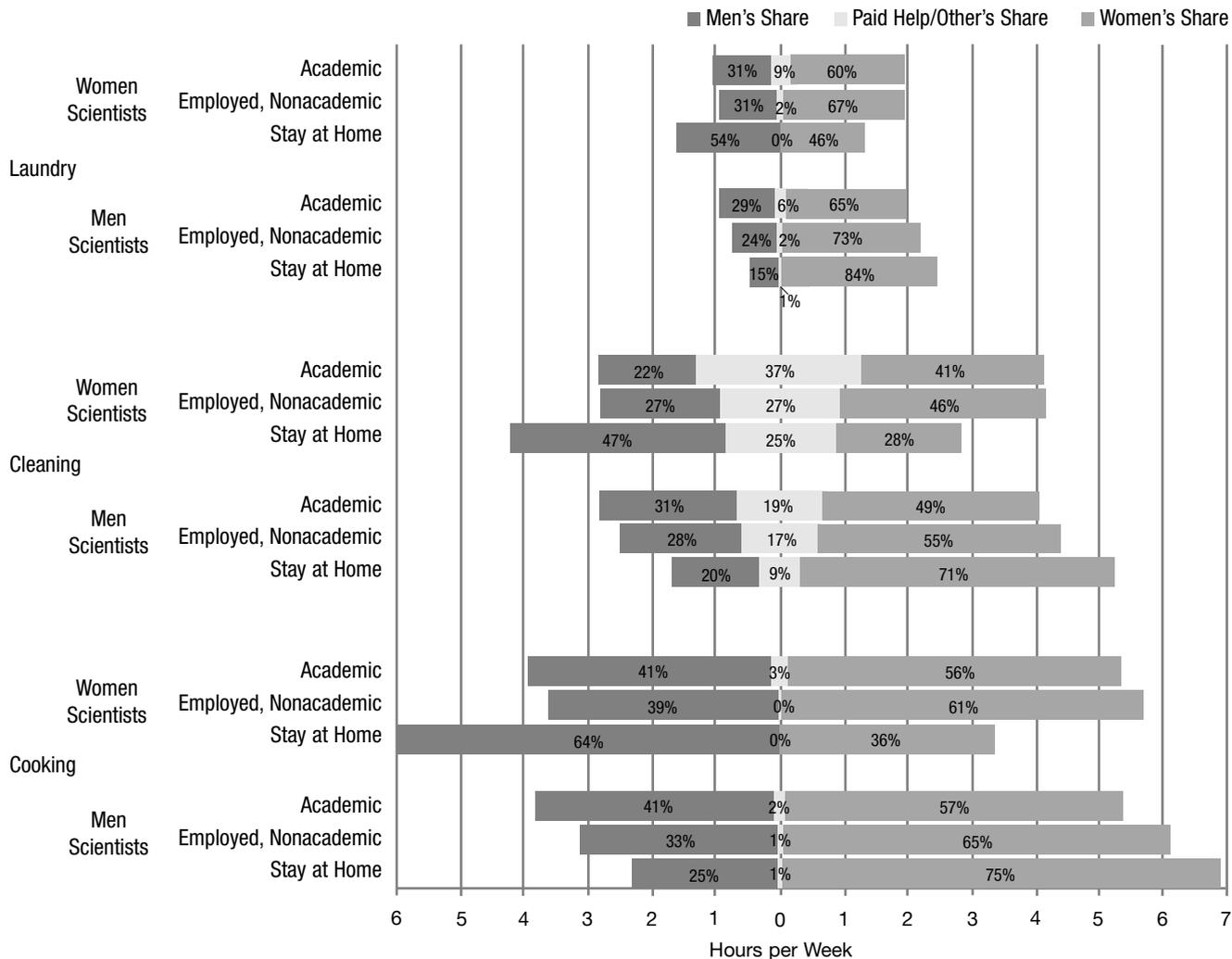
Figure 1
Division of Household Labor in Scientists' Homes



Note: For each task, respondents reported their own share of labor, paid help/other's share, and their partner's share. In all figures, percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Women scientists do 54 percent of core household tasks (cooking, cleaning, and laundry) in their homes. Men scientists do 28 percent. These tasks consume an average of 19.3 hours a week. Men contribute more to yard and car care, house repair, and finance, but these tasks are periodic and estimated to take on average about 4.7 hours a week.

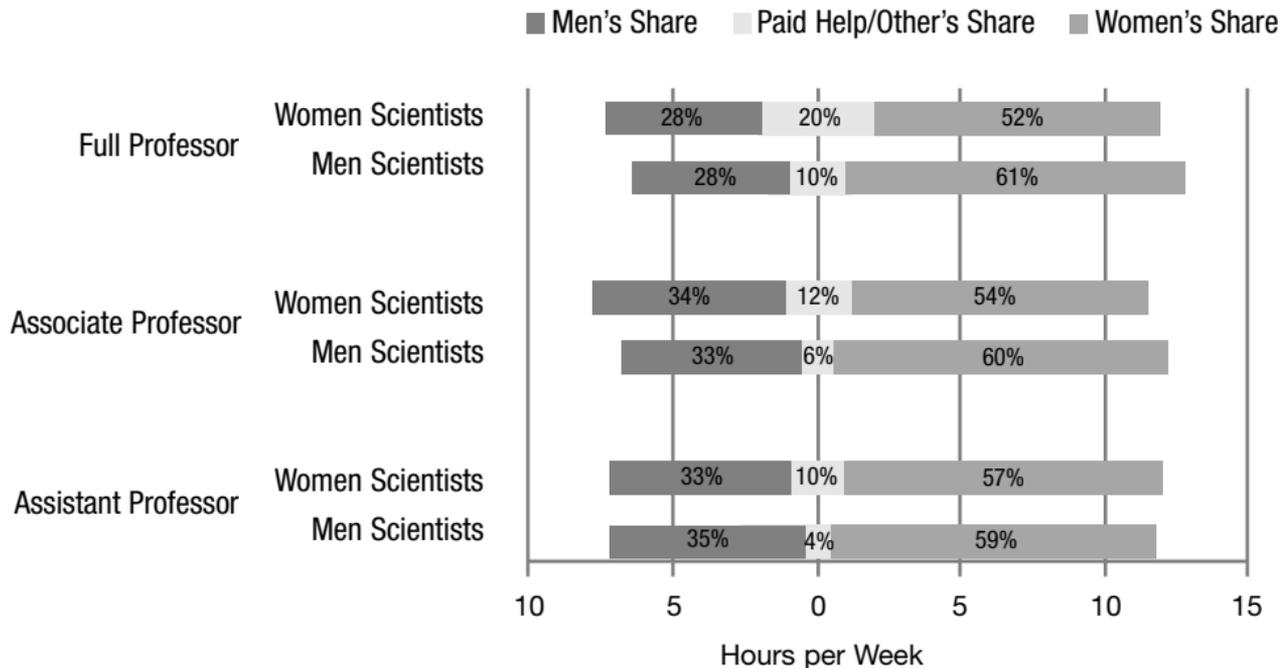
Figure 2
Division of Labor in Scientists' Homes, by Partner Employment Status



Men scientists with stay-at-home partners do the least core housework. The division of labor for academic couples is similar to that of other dual-career couples.

Figure 3

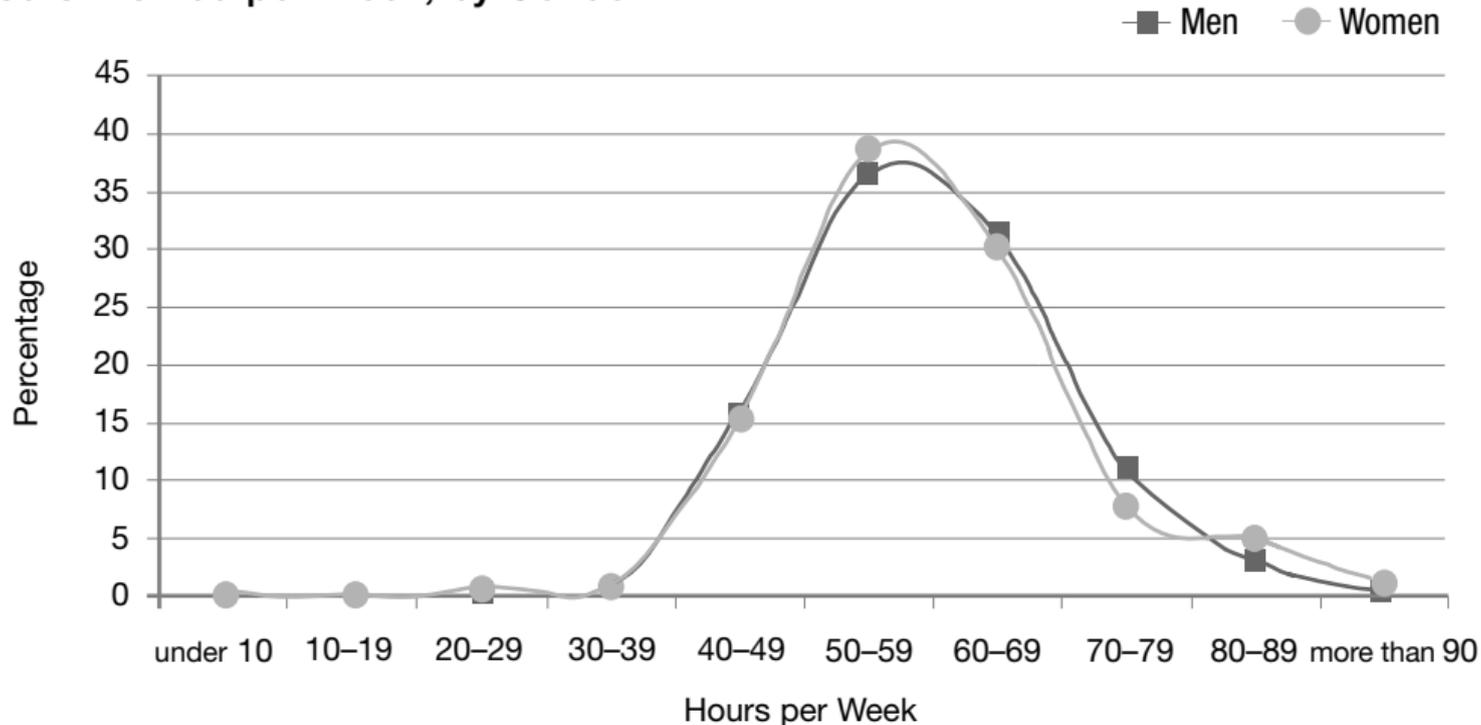
Division of Core Household Tasks, by Academic Rank



Note: Figure describes scientists in dual-career partnerships only.

Women scientists take on a greater share of core housework than do men scientists at all ranks. Men assistant professors take on more core housework than do men full professors.

Figure 4
Hours Worked per Week, by Gender



Scientists average nearly sixty-hour workweeks. There is no significant difference between men and women scientists in this regard.