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Gender and Family in Transition: Care, Bargaining and the Unfinished Gender Revolution

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Abstract

The relationship between gender and family is being renegotiated in most societies, but the direction and pace of change are uneven. This article examines four dimensions of that renegotiation: the allocation of unpaid care work, women's economic position, the transformation of household structure, and the link between domestic equality and fertility intentions. It reports a comparative secondary analysis of the 2025 and 2026 Gender Snapshot reports, recent national statistical releases for Italy, Morocco and Singapore, and five recent studies of housework division and fertility intentions published between 2024 and 2026. Four findings emerge. First, unpaid care remains the most unequal element of family life: women perform about two and a half times as much unpaid domestic and care work as men globally, and more than four times as much in Northern Africa and Western Asia. Second, economic convergence has stalled short of parity: 63.9 per cent of women aged 25-54 are in the labour force against 92.0 per cent of men, and women hold 30.5 per cent of managerial positions. Third, household structure has diversified rather than declined, with single-person and single-parent households growing while couples with children have fallen sharply. Fourth, the link between domestic equality and fertility intentions is conditional on gender, task type and employment rather than uniform. The article argues that the gender revolution is not stalled for lack of changed attitudes but because the institutions that would redistribute care - services, leave and working-time regulation - have not kept pace with changed expectations.

Keywords: gender, family, unpaid care work, division of household labour, fertility intentions, gender revolution, household structure, care policy, intersectionality

1. Introduction

The family has never been a stable object, but the pace and direction of its transformation over the past half-century is without precedent. Across most of the world, marriage has been postponed, fertility has fallen below replacement in two-thirds of countries, household size has contracted and the variety of household forms has expanded. At the same time, women's educational attainment now exceeds men's in most countries, and women's labour force participation has risen in 128 of 186 countries since 2015 (UN Women, 2026). These two sets of changes are connected, and the connection is the subject of this article.

The puzzle that frames the analysis is the persistence of inequality inside the household alongside convergence outside it. Women have converged on men in education and, partially, in employment, but the domestic division of labour has changed far more slowly. Globally, women perform about two and a half times as much unpaid domestic and care work as men, and in Northern Africa and Western Asia the ratio exceeds four to one (UN Women, 2025, 2026). The consequence is a double burden: women's paid working time has risen without a commensurate reduction in their unpaid working time. In 2024, women in paid work spent six hours and twenty-five minutes less per week on paid work than men, and around 708 million women remain outside the labour force altogether (UN Women, 2025).

Three questions follow. How unequal is the domestic allocation of time and money, and where is the inequality greatest? Is the transformation of household structure a decline of family or a diversification of it? And does domestic equality affect the decisions that shape the next generation - above all whether to have children? Each has been extensively studied in individual countries, but rarely brought together with the most recent global evidence.

This article makes three contributions. It integrates four theoretical traditions - the gender revolution framework, doing gender, the political economy of care, and demographic accounts of the second transition - into a single

framework that treats the household as a site of bargaining under structural constraint (Figure 1). It assembles the most recent comparative evidence on care, economic position and household structure. And it reports what recent quantitative studies actually find about the link between domestic equality and fertility intentions, which turns out to be conditional rather than uniform.

Section 2 reviews the literature. Section 3 describes the comparative secondary analysis. Section 4 presents findings. Section 5 discusses implications, and Section 6 concludes.

2. Literature Review

2.1 From the Breadwinner Family to the Gender Revolution

Mid-century family sociology described a division of labour between an instrumental male breadwinner and an expressive female homemaker as functional for industrial society (Parsons & Bales, 1955), and modernisation theory expected family structures to converge on this nuclear model as economies developed (Goode, 1963). Feminist scholars dismantled both claims. Oakley (1974) showed that housework is work, not a natural expression of femininity, and Hochschild and Machung (2012) documented the 'second shift' in which employed mothers completed a full day of paid work before beginning a second day at home. Becker's (1981) economic treatment of the family supplied a different and influential account, modelling the household as a unitary actor allocating time efficiently according to comparative advantage - a model critics argued obscured power and conflict within the household.

The gender revolution framework synthesises these strands. Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegård (2015) argue that the transition proceeds in two halves: first women's entry into public-sphere institutions, then men's entry into the private sphere of care. The revolution stalls when the first half proceeds and the second does not, because women absorb the resulting incompatibility individually rather than collectively. Esping-Andersen and Billari (2015) propose that the second half is in fact the engine of demographic recovery: gender-egalitarian family arrangements, rather than female employment alone, predict higher fertility.

2.2 Doing Gender, Intersectionality and the Household

A second tradition insists that gender is produced in interaction rather than possessed by individuals. West and Zimmerman (1987) formulated gender as an ongoing accomplishment, accountable to conventional expectations, which explains why inequality persists even among actors who reject it in principle: the division of housework is a site at which gender is continually re-made. Butler (1990) radicalised the argument by treating gender as performative constituted through repeated citation of norms. Connell (2005) located the mechanism in structures of power and cathexis rather than in individual acts.

The intersectional critique adds that the household is not a single institution experienced uniformly. Class structures which families can purchase relief from domestic labour and which cannot; migration status, disability and household type all condition the experience of care and the terms of bargaining. Comparative statistics on women as a whole therefore conceal differences that matter for policy: the conditions of a single mother in low-wage employment and of a professional woman in a dual-earner household differ in kind, not degree.

2.3 Care as Political Economy

A third tradition treats care as an economic activity with distributional consequences rather than as a private expression of affection. Folbre (2001) argued that care creates value that markets and national accounts systematically fail to register, producing what she called the invisible heart of the economy. Tronto (1993) framed care as a political practice involving attentiveness, responsibility, competence and responsiveness. Fraser (2016) identified care as a contradiction at the centre of contemporary capitalism: the system depends on care work while dismantling the conditions under which it can be performed. England (2005) showed that care work is systematically underpaid precisely because it is coded as feminine.

The policy implication of this tradition is that redistribution requires services, not exhortation. Paid leave, affordable childcare, elder-care provision and working-time regulation change what households can do; information campaigns and attitude change do not. This distinction becomes empirically testable in Section 4.

The demographic tradition reached a closely related conclusion by a different route. McDonald (2000) argued that fertility is lowest not where gender inequality is greatest but where the two halves of modernisation are out of step: women gain equality in individual-oriented institutions such as education and employment, while family-oriented institutions - the household division of labour, workplace organisation, and the availability of care - remain organised around a male-breadwinner assumption. The resulting incoherence, rather than inequality as such, produces very low fertility. The formulation is important because it predicts that simply

increasing female employment without changing domestic institutions will depress rather than raise fertility - a prediction that Section 4.4 shows to be broadly supported, though with important qualifications.

2.4 Family Change: Diversification Rather Than Decline

Demographic theory has largely abandoned the language of family decline. The second demographic transition framework describes a shift in which marriage and parenthood become options among others rather than stages in a fixed sequence, driven by higher-order needs and individualisation rather than by material necessity (Van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 2010). Giddens (1992) described the underlying transformation as a move from a traditional to a 'pure' relationship, sustained only for as long as it delivers satisfaction. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) analysed the resulting individualisation, in which biographies become reflexive projects negotiated under structural constraint rather than inherited scripts.

Empirically, the diversification reading is supported by household composition data: single-person and single-parent households have grown while the two-parent household with children has contracted, but family relationships have not disappeared - they have been redistributed across household types and across the life course. Begall and Hiekel's (2024) recent evidence that fertility decline has accelerated even in Nordic countries complicates the optimistic version of this story and requires explanation.

2.5 Gaps

Three gaps structure the present study. First, the theoretical traditions are rarely combined: the gender revolution framework measures domestic equality, the care tradition analyses its economic basis, and the demographic tradition measures its consequences, but few studies connect all three. Second, the most recent global evidence on care and economic position has not been brought together with household-composition data. Third, the rapidly growing literature on housework division and fertility intentions has produced findings that appear contradictory - positive, negative and null associations depending on country, gender of respondent and task type - and no synthesis has yet explained why.

Figure 1 assembles the traditions into a single framework. Structural conditions - legal rights, labour markets, care services and norms - shape the processes that occur inside households: bargaining over time and money, allocation of unpaid care, the everyday accomplishment of gender, and the negotiation of fertility intentions. These processes generate outcomes in employment, wellbeing, family form and intergenerational transmission, which in turn feed back into norms, fiscal capacity and demand for services. The framework's analytic value is that it locates the household as a site of bargaining under constraint rather than as a site of free choice, which makes the distribution of care a structural question rather than a private one.

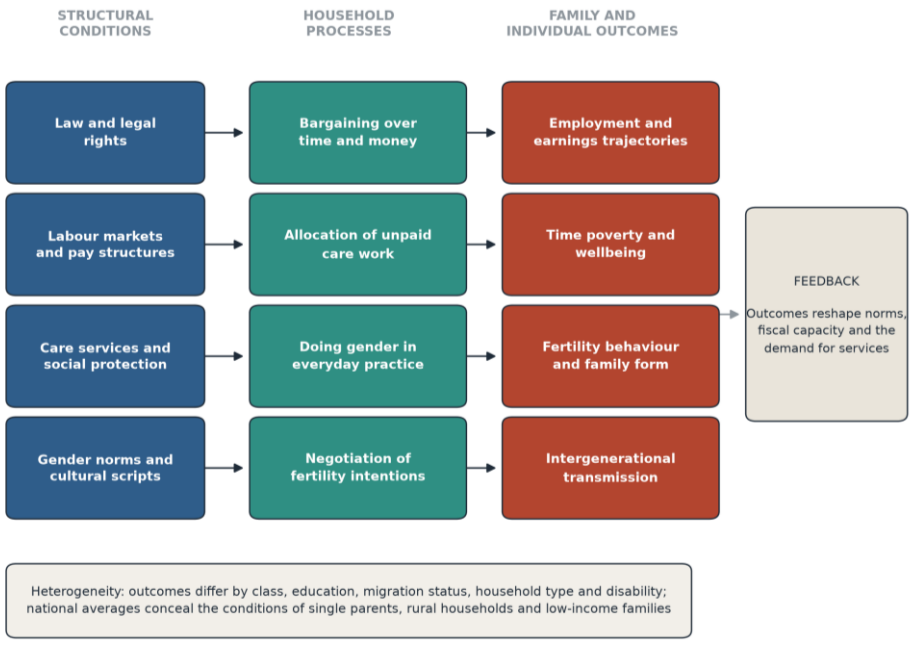


Figure 1. A framework for gender and family analysis: structures, bargaining and outcomes

3. Method

3.1 Design

The study is a comparative secondary analysis. Because the four dimensions of interest - care allocation, economic position, household structure and fertility intentions - are measured by different instruments in different populations, no single dataset covers all four; a secondary design was therefore chosen in preference to a primary survey. The design has three components: (a) reconstruction of global and regional patterns of care and economic position from the Gender Snapshot series; (b) reconstruction of household-composition change from national statistical releases; and (c) a structured synthesis of recent quantitative studies of domestic division and fertility intentions.

The design is explanatory rather than confirmatory. No hypotheses were pre-registered and no causal estimates are claimed beyond those reported by the primary studies. The purpose is to establish whether the global pattern - persistent care inequality alongside partial economic convergence - is consistent with the national and individual-level patterns, and to specify what follows if they are.

3.2 Evidence Base

Sources were eligible if they (i) reported original data or original empirical analysis of gender, family or household arrangements; (ii) were published in 2021 or later with priority to 2023-2026; (iii) documented sampling or data sources; and (iv) were available in English. Table 1 summarises the principal sources. Two features shape interpretation. The global indicators are broad but derive from modelled estimates with uneven country coverage, and time-use data in particular are available for far fewer countries than labour-force data. The national and individual-level studies are more precise but specific to their contexts.

Table 1. Principal evidence base

Source	Year	Coverage and design	Contribution
UN Women and UN DESA, Gender Snapshot	2025	Global; more than 100 data sources across all 17 SDGs	Unpaid care ratios, poverty, labour market indicators (Section 4.1)
UN Women, Gender Snapshot	2026	Global; updated SDG gender indicators	Participation, management, research and AI occupation shares (Sections 4.2, 4.5)
UN Women, Annual Report of the Executive Director	2026	Global; strategic plan reporting	Legal rights, parliamentary and cabinet representation; care ratios (Sections 4.2, 4.5)
ISTAT, Demographic Indicators	2026	Italy; national population registers and surveys, 2003-2025	Household composition over two decades (Section 4.3)
High Commission for Planning, National Family Survey	2025	Morocco; national family survey, 1995-2025	Household size, female headship, marriage intentions (Section 4.3)
Zheng, General Household Survey analysis	2026	Singapore; General Household Survey 2025	Dual-earner couples, marriage timing, marital fertility (Section 4.3)
Dang	2026	China; China Family Panel Studies, GSEM mediation	Occupational pairing, housework and fertility intentions (Section 4.4)
Ishchanova	2026	Belarus; Generations and Gender Survey 2017	Fathers' involvement and fertility intentions by gender (Section 4.4)
Wang	2026	Taiwan; Panel Study of Family Dynamics 2022, n = 1,893	Housework share, gender attitudes and fertility gap (Section 4.4)
Erfani and Pilon	2025	Canada; General Social Survey, n = 1,589	Employment as moderator of housework-fertility link (Section 4.4)

3.3 Analytic Procedures and Limitations

Two procedures were applied. For the global reconstruction, reported indicators were assembled by theme and plotted at the level of aggregation used by the source; no composite index was constructed, because coverage differs substantially across indicators and a composite would weight the best-documented countries most heavily. For the synthesis of fertility-intention studies, each study was coded for country, data source, measure of domestic division, measure of intention, gender of respondent and the direction and significance of the reported association. Coding was applied to published findings rather than to raw data.

Four limitations should be stated. Time-use data - the only direct measure of the central variable - are available for far fewer countries than labour-force data, and survey design affects what is recorded: simultaneous activities are poorly captured, and short reference periods miss seasonal care. The analysis cannot distinguish cohort from period effects in the household-composition data. The fertility-intention studies measure intentions, not births, and the intention-behaviour gap is well documented. And the global indicators are modelled estimates whose country coverage is uneven.

4. Findings

4.1 The Persistence of Unequal Care

The first finding is that unpaid care remains the most unequal element of family life and the slowest to change. Women perform about two and a half times as much unpaid domestic and care work as men globally, with the ratio exceeding four to one in Northern Africa and Western Asia and standing at roughly two to one in Europe, Northern America and Oceania (UN Women, 2025, 2026). Figure 2 presents the regional pattern. The ratio has narrowed in a number of countries - including Colombia, the Dominican Republic, Germany, Japan, Mexico, Mongolia, the United Kingdom and the United States - but in most cases narrowing reflects men doing somewhat more rather than women doing substantially less.

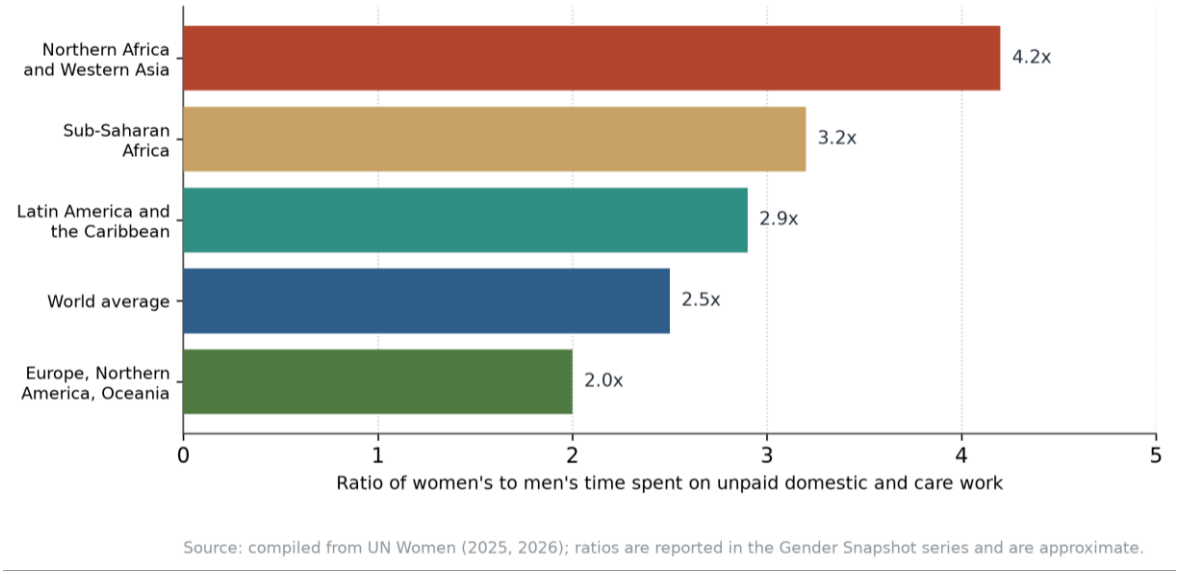


Figure 2. Gender ratio in unpaid care work by region, latest available year

This distinction matters and is frequently lost. A falling ratio is reported as progress, but a ratio can improve while women's absolute care time is unchanged, or while total household care demand rises for both partners. The appropriate accountability rule is therefore to report the ratio and the absolute hours together, and to ask which of three things happened: women's workload fell, men's contribution rose, or public services reduced total demand. On the available evidence, the dominant mechanism is the second, and it is the weakest of the three for reducing women's total burden.

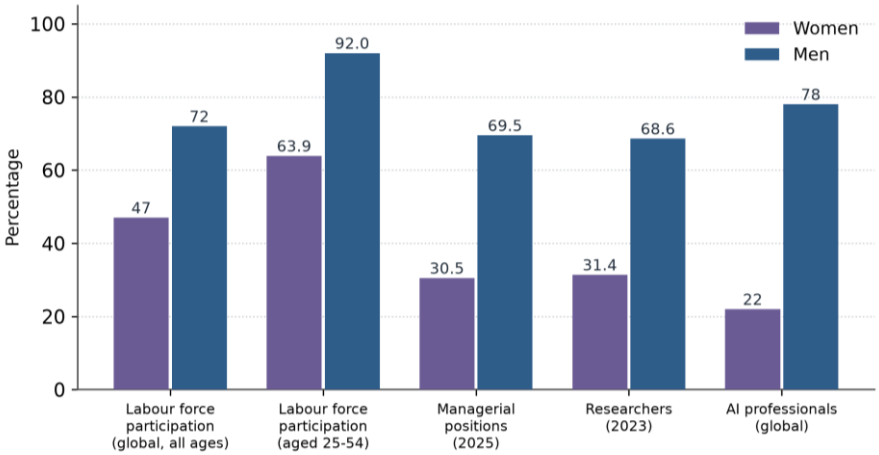
The consequences are measurable. Around 708 million women remain outside the labour force, and women in paid work spend six hours and twenty-five minutes fewer per week on paid work than men (UN Women, 2025). Care also structures poverty risk: under current trends some 351 million women and girls could still live in

extreme poverty in 2030, and unpaid care contributes to that risk by limiting both paid employment and earnings. The direction of causation runs both ways - poverty increases care time where households lack water, energy, transport or affordable childcare - which is why infrastructure investment outside the conventional social sector belongs in care policy.

Two features of the long-run record qualify any optimistic reading. Cross-national work on time-use data finds that gender convergence in domestic work is real but slow and uneven, with the gap narrowing mainly through reductions in women's most time-intensive tasks rather than through any substantial reallocation of routine work (Kan et al., 2011). A fifty-year update across industrialised countries confirms that convergence has proceeded further in some domains than others and has stalled in recent cohorts (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016). The aggregate picture is therefore of a ratio that improves slowly from a very unequal starting point - consistent with the observation that narrowing ratios mostly reflect men doing somewhat more rather than women doing substantially less.

4.2 Partial Economic Convergence

The second finding is that economic convergence is real but stops short of parity, and stalls most visibly at the top of the occupational hierarchy. Labour force participation rose for women in 128 of 186 countries between 2015 and 2026 and the gender gap narrowed in 135 countries. Yet in 2026 just under two in three women aged 25-54 were in the labour force, at 63.9 per cent, against more than nine in ten men, at 92.0 per cent (UN Women, 2026). Figure 3 presents the pattern across five indicators.



Source: compiled from UN Women (2026). Men's shares in the final three columns are residual estimates derived from the reported women's shares.

Figure 3. Gender gaps in economic position, latest available year

Convergence is weakest where hierarchy is greatest. Women held 30.5 per cent of managerial positions in 2025, up from 26.9 per cent in 2015, with stark regional variation - 11.6 per cent in Central and Southern Asia. Even where women reach management, pay inequality follows: female managers earned less per hour than male managers in the large majority of countries with data between 2020 and 2025 (UN Women, 2026). Women account for 31.4 per cent of researchers and only around 22 per cent of artificial intelligence professionals, holding fewer than 14 per cent of senior positions in the field - a distribution that matters because these are the occupations shaping the next generation of workplace technologies.

Three mechanisms account for the stall at senior levels, and each has a distinct remedy. The first is the earnings penalty attached to care-related interruptions and to reduced hours: a substantial share of the residual gender wage gap in high-income countries remains unexplained by observable human capital and is associated with occupational sorting and the structure of working time (Blau & Kahn, 2017). The second is a direct motherhood penalty in hiring and evaluation: experimental evidence shows that otherwise identical candidates are rated lower and offered less when they are identified as mothers, whereas fathers incur no comparable penalty (Correll et al., 2007). The third is the temporal structure of demanding occupations themselves, which Goldin (2021) shows to be decisive: where pay rises disproportionately with long and unpredictable hours, couples rationally specialise,

and the unequal distribution of care follows from the organisation of work rather than from preferences.

Two structural features sustain the gap. The first is informality: women's share of informal employment declined only marginally, from 56.8 to 55.2 per cent between 2019 and 2025, with transitions to formal employment three times slower than men's (UN Women, 2026). The second is the unequal distribution of care, which Section 4.1 established. Women's employment is responsive to the availability of care services and to working-time regulation in a way that men's is not, because the default allocation of care remains theirs. Global employment assessments confirm that women remain disproportionately concentrated in informal and insecure forms of work, and that the quality of employment rather than its quantity is now the principal dimension of gender inequality in labour markets (ILO, 2025).

4.3 Diversification of Household Structure

The third finding is that household structure has diversified rather than declined, and that this diversification has a gendered composition. Italian data spanning two decades are the clearest available illustration: single-person households rose from 25.9 per cent to 37.1 per cent, couples with children fell from 41.4 per cent to 28.4 per cent - the sharpest decline of any type - while single-parent households rose from 8.5 to 10.8 per cent, of which single mothers account for 8.6 points and single fathers 2.2 points (ISTAT, 2026). Average household size fell from 2.6 to 2.2. Figure 4 presents the change.

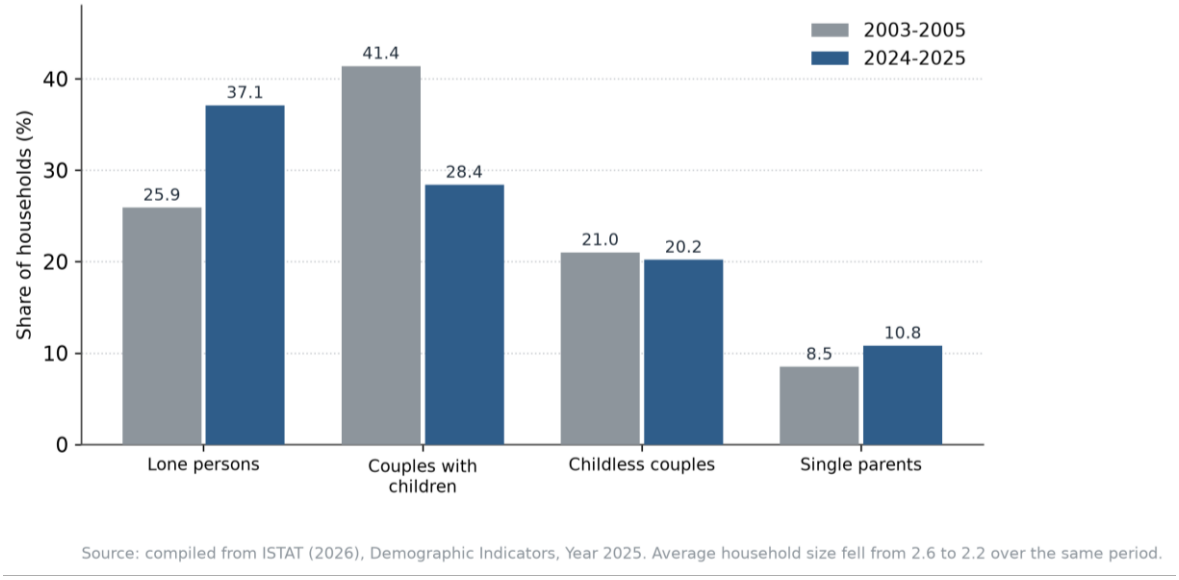


Figure 4. Household structure in Italy, 2003-2005 and 2024-2025

The pattern is not peculiar to Europe. In Morocco, household size fell from 4.6 people in 2014 to 3.9 in 2024, female-headed households rose from 16.2 to 19.2 per cent, and the share of couples without children rose from 3.4 per cent in 1995 to 9.4 per cent in 2025 (HCP, 2025). In the same survey 51.7 per cent of single adults said they did not wish to marry, but the gender gap within that response is instructive: 53.6 per cent of women still view marriage positively against 31.5 per cent of men. In Singapore, analysis of the 2025 General Household Survey indicates that rising singlehood among 25 to 34 year-olds reflects postponement rather than rejection, with more than 85 per cent still marrying by their late forties, that dual-income couples now account for 56.6 per cent of marriages, and that average children among married women aged 40 to 49 fell from 1.76 to 1.67 (Zheng, 2026).

Three observations follow. Family relationships have been redistributed rather than abandoned. Women-headed households are growing fastest, which makes the gendered distribution of care and earnings a question of household-type composition as well as of within-couple bargaining. And in every setting, smaller families coexist with more intensive investment per child - what Zheng (2026) describes as a shift in which parenthood becomes a deliberate, resource-intensive project rather than an automatic stage.

4.4 Domestic Division and Fertility Intentions

The fourth finding concerns whether domestic equality affects the decision to have children, and it is more conditional than the prevailing theory predicts. Five recent studies, using different data and different measures, produce results that differ systematically by gender of respondent, by type of task and by employment status.

In Canada, women who shared routine and intermittent household tasks with a partner reported higher fertility intentions, but the relationship was moderated by employment: employed women who did not share routine tasks equally had a much lower probability of intending a birth, at 0.22, against 0.48 for their unemployed counterparts (Erfani & Pilon, 2025). In Italy, the association between domestic burden and fertility intentions appeared only for women, and its direction differed by parity: among childless women a heavier burden correlated negatively with the intention to enter motherhood, whereas among mothers of one child - particularly mothers of a daughter - higher burden correlated positively with intending another child (García-Pereiro et al., 2025). In Belarus, fathers' involvement in childcare predicted fathers' fertility intentions but not mothers', while fathers' involvement in housework predicted mothers' intentions but not fathers' (Ishchanova, 2026). In Taiwan, a higher wife's housework share predicted a smaller fertility gap among male respondents but not among female respondents, for whom traditional gender-role attitudes were the significant predictor (Wang, 2026). And in China, women who 'married up' occupationally bore a heavier housework load, while the effect of the division on fertility intentions operated through both the actual division and wives' satisfaction with it - with the paradoxical result that wives undertaking most of the housework were not necessarily dissatisfied (Dang, 2026).

Taken together, these results qualify the gender revolution hypothesis in three ways. The effect of domestic equality is not symmetric: what matters for a woman's fertility intention is not the same as what matters for a man's. The type of task matters: childcare involvement and housework involvement have different associations. And employment is the decisive moderator, because it is employed women who experience the double burden acutely. The hypothesis is therefore not wrong but under-specified: it is not gender equality in the abstract that predicts fertility intentions, but whether equality resolves a practical conflict that the respondent actually experiences.

A further qualification comes from the distinction between intentions and outcomes. Recent evidence from a lowest-low fertility context shows that a substantial share of stated desires for children remain unmet, and that the gap between what people intend and what they achieve is itself structured by economic uncertainty and by the availability of support (Feltrin et al., 2026). Any account that treats intentions as a proxy for completed fertility will therefore overstate the effect of domestic arrangements on demographic outcomes, because the translation of intention into behaviour depends on conditions that lie outside the household.

Table 3 summarises the five studies. Arranged this way, the apparent contradictions resolve into a pattern: the association between domestic equality and fertility intentions is consistently conditional on who is asked and on which task is measured, and employment status is the moderator that most reliably determines whether the relationship appears at all.

Table 2. Recent studies of domestic division and fertility intentions

Study	Country and data	Key result	Condition identified
Erfani and Pilon (2025)	Canada; General Social Survey, n = 1,589	Shared housework associated with higher intentions; employed women without sharing show the lowest probability (0.22 versus 0.48)	Employment status moderates the relationship
García-Pereiro et al. (2025)	Italy; ISTAT Family and Social Subjects survey	Association present for women only; negative for childless women, positive for mothers of one child	Parity and sex of existing child
Ishchanova (2026)	Belarus; Generations and Gender Survey 2017	Fathers' childcare involvement predicts fathers' intentions; fathers' housework predicts mothers' intentions	Gender of respondent and type of task
Wang (2026)	Taiwan; Panel Study of	Wife's housework share predicts	Gender of respondent;

Study	Country and data	Key result	Condition identified
	Family Dynamics 2022, n = 1,893	smaller fertility gap for men; gender-role attitudes predict it for women	attitudes versus behaviour
Dang (2026)	China; China Family Panel Studies	Women who 'marry up' bear heavier housework; actual division and satisfaction both suppress the pairing effect	Occupational pairing; objective and subjective equality differ

4.5 Structural Position and the Legal Frame

The fifth finding concerns the framework within which households bargain. Women globally hold just 64 per cent of the legal rights of men (UN Women, 2026). Women's representation in parliaments stagnated at 27.2 per cent in 2025, at which rate parity is unlikely before 2063; the share of women holding cabinet positions fell slightly to 22.9 per cent; and only 28 countries were headed by women (UN Women, 2026). Representation in local government rose marginally to 35.6 per cent, one of the few indicators close to target. Figure 5 assembles the structural indicators.

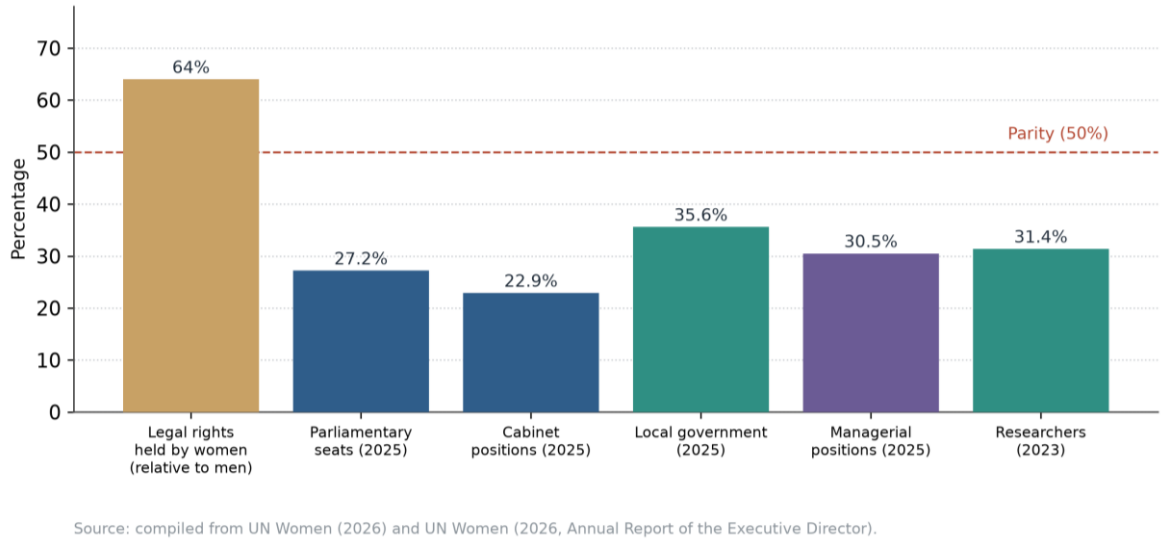


Figure 5. Women's structural position: rights, representation and occupational attainment

These figures matter for family analysis for a specific reason: the legal frame sets the default terms of bargaining. Where law does not secure equal rights to property, inheritance, divorce or employment, women enter household negotiation with weaker fall-back positions, which affects both the division of labour and the division of resources regardless of individual preferences. The persistence of intimate partner violence reinforces the point: the average global annual decline in physical or sexual intimate partner violence between 2000 and 2023 was just 0.2 per cent, and 1.8 billion women and girls lack legal protection against such violence (UN Women, 2026).

A final element of the structural frame is fiscal and political rather than legal. Funding for gender equality is contracting at precisely the moment the institutional work is most advanced: bilateral allocable aid with gender equality objectives fell by 13 per cent between 2023 and 2024, and funding to women's rights organisations fell by 28 per cent over the same period (UN Women, 2026). The practical significance for family policy is direct: the organisations that provide frontline services, monitor implementation and sustain advocacy for care infrastructure are those experiencing the steepest retrenchment, which slows the institutional change on which redistribution of care depends.

4.6 Synthesis

Table 3 brings the findings together within the domains used in the framework. The synthesis they support is that change has been unequal across domains in a specific pattern: greatest in education and in entry to employment, partial in occupational attainment and representation, and least in the allocation of unpaid care, which is the domain closest to the household and most resistant to individual-level change.

Table 3. Domains of gender inequality in the family: change and resistance

Domain	Direction of change	Indicators	Resistance mechanism
Education and entry to employment	Substantial convergence; women now exceed men in tertiary enrolment in most countries	Participation 63.9 per cent of women aged 25-54 (UN Women, 2026)	Remaining barriers are sectoral and informal
Occupational attainment	Slow improvement; stalls at senior levels	30.5 per cent managers; 31.4 per cent researchers; 22 per cent of AI professionals	Pay structures; promotion processes; networks
Unpaid care work	Minimal change; ratios remain above two to one nearly everywhere	2.5x globally; above 4x in Northern Africa and Western Asia	Norms; absence of services; working-time structures
Household structure	Rapid diversification; single-person and single-parent growth	Single-person households 37.1 per cent in Italy; female headship 19.2 per cent in Morocco	Housing costs; care infrastructure; labour market precarity
Legal and political position	Stagnation and partial reversal	64 per cent of men's legal rights; 27.2 per cent of parliamentary seats	Political contestation; shrinking funding for equality work
Violence and security	Very slow improvement; new digital forms emerging	0.2 per cent annual decline in intimate partner violence; 1.8 billion without legal protection	Implementation gaps; technology-facilitated abuse

5. Discussion

5.1 Why the Revolution Stalls Where It Does

The findings support a specific version of the stalled-gender-revolution argument. Convergence has been greatest where individual action suffices - acquiring education, entering employment - and least where it requires institutional change. A woman can decide to study or to seek work; she cannot individually decide that childcare will be affordable, that her employer will offer predictable hours, or that her partner's workplace will permit him to take leave. The pattern of change therefore maps onto the degree of institutional mediation rather than onto the strength of resistance to change in attitudes.

This reading is supported by the cross-national evidence on attitudes. Survey data from Middle Eastern societies show that support for equal working opportunities is the majority position in most countries, and that women are consistently ten to twenty points more supportive than men, yet female labour-force participation remains the lowest of any region - evidence that the constraint is structural rather than attitudinal (European Union Institute for Security Studies [EUISS], 2025; Arab Barometer, 2025). The same logic applies within households: the divergence between what partners consider fair and what they actually do is a structural fact about time and services, not a failure of conviction.

5.2 Reconciling the Fertility Findings

The apparently contradictory fertility results reconcile once three distinctions are made. The first is between intention and behaviour; all five studies measure intentions, and the intention-behaviour gap is large and itself

varies by institutional context. The second is between the gender of the respondent: what predicts a man's intention is not what predicts a woman's, because the practical conflict each faces differs. The third is between task types: housework and childcare load are not interchangeable, and relief in one does not substitute for relief in the other.

A further reconciliation is available from the demographic side. Recent evidence that fertility decline has accelerated even in the Nordic countries, which had been the strongest empirical support for the gender-equality hypothesis, suggests that domestic equality is necessary but no longer sufficient. Where equality has been substantially achieved, other constraints - housing costs, employment precarity, and the rising intensity of parenting norms - become binding. The implication for policy is that care infrastructure is a precondition for fertility recovery rather than a guarantee of it.

5.3 Care Infrastructure as Family Policy

If the binding mechanism is the absence of redistributive institutions, then family policy is substantially care policy, and the evaluative criterion should be time rather than money. Affordable childcare, elder-care and disability services, paid leave designed to be taken by men as well as women, predictable and shorter working hours, and social-protection credits for care periods all operate on the same variable: how much unpaid work households must absorb. Programmes should be appraised by whether they expand choice, replace income, or implicitly assume that one household member will remain outside paid work.

Two cautions follow from the care literature. First, expanding services through low-waged and insecure employment shifts burdens from unpaid women to poorly paid women, often migrants, rather than reducing them; staffing, wages and working conditions must be tracked alongside the number of places created. Second, cash benefits may entrench unequal roles where services and employment rights remain weak, because they compensate for care without changing who provides it. The distribution of care between households, the state, employers and markets matters as much as its distribution between women and men.

5.4 Practical Implications

Four implications follow for practitioners and policymakers.

- Measure time, not only money: repeated, comparable time-use surveys reporting both ratios and absolute hours are the precondition for knowing whether care policy works.
- Target employment, not only attitudes: the fertility evidence shows that employment status moderates the effect of domestic inequality, so reconciling services should prioritise employed women.
- Design leave for uptake: leave that only mothers take reproduces the allocation it was intended to change; fathers' quotas and non-transferable entitlements address the mechanism directly.
- Regulate care employment: quality, pay and conditions in paid care determine whether service expansion redistributes work or merely relocates it onto lower-paid women.

A final implication concerns heterogeneity, because the aggregate indicators reviewed in Section 4 conceal differences that matter enormously for design. National ratios of unpaid care tell us nothing about the conditions of single parents, of rural households without piped water, of women with disabilities, or of migrant domestic workers whose paid care work enables other women's employment. The evidence reviewed here repeatedly shows that the burden is heaviest where several disadvantages combine, and that programmes designed around a modal dual-earner household systematically fail those outside it. Disaggregated measurement is therefore not a technical refinement but a requirement for policy that reaches the households with the least capacity to absorb care privately.

6. Conclusions

Gender and family are being renegotiated simultaneously, and the renegotiation is proceeding at different speeds in different domains. Women's education and employment have converged substantially; their occupational attainment and political representation have improved slowly and remain far from parity; and the domestic allocation of unpaid care has barely changed, with women still performing about two and a half times as much as men globally and more than four times as much in Northern Africa and Western Asia. Household structures have diversified rapidly, and the link between domestic equality and fertility intentions is real but conditional on gender, task type and employment rather than uniform.

The article's central argument is that this pattern is explained by institutional mediation rather than by attitudes. Change has been greatest where individual action is sufficient and least where collective provision is required, which is why the unfinished business of the gender revolution is care. The findings reviewed here suggest that

assessments of fairness within households have moved faster than the services, leave arrangements and working-time regulation that would let households act on them.

Both the synthesis and the argument are offered with the limitations stated in Section 3.3. Time-use data remain sparse and inconsistently designed; the fertility evidence measures intentions rather than births; and the global indicators are modelled estimates with uneven coverage. The most consequential of these is the first: the central variable in the analysis is the least well measured, and repeated, comparable, disaggregated time-use measurement is the single investment that would most improve the evidence base.

The practical conclusion is straightforward. Societies that want both gender equality and viable family formation should stop exhorting households to divide care differently and start reducing the amount of care households must absorb. That requires services rather than campaigns, leave designed for uptake rather than leave merely available, and working-time regulation that treats care as a permanent feature of adult life. The gender revolution did not stall because people changed their minds; it stalled because the institutions that would let them act on their changed minds were never built.

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