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Sharing household tasks: Teaming up during the COVID-19 pandemic

by Clémence Zossou

Lockdowns were put in place at the beginning of the pandemic to slow the spread of COVID-19. For Canadian families, this meant telework, school and daycare closures, online classes, and cancelled extracurricular activities. In addition, outings were limited.

These measures, which affected Canadian families throughout the pandemic, also altered dynamics within households. How couples¹ shared household tasks during these unprecedented times is therefore worth examining. Before the pandemic, and regardless of employment status, women spent more time than men doing household tasks and more often adjusted their schedule to meet the needs of their family.²

This analysis shows how couples³ in Canada shared household tasks in the early months of the pandemic. It looks at the differences between women and men in how these tasks were shared and the level of satisfaction with their allocation. The impact of having children in the household or not, and of the significant increase in telework⁴, is also examined.

This article is based on data from the third wave of the Canadian Perspectives Survey Series, which took place from June 15 to 21, 2020. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Statistics Canada has been conducting this series of surveys, which is statistically representative of the Canadian population. This specific survey dealt with, among other topics, the distribution of household tasks among couples living together.

Canadians' satisfaction with the distribution of household tasks remained the same during the pandemic

During the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, nearly 7 in 10 Canadians (68%) reported being satisfied with how household tasks were shared with their spouse or partner. However, the level of satisfaction varied by respondent age and sex.

A higher proportion of individuals aged 55 and older (74%) said they were satisfied with the distribution of household tasks, compared with people younger than 55 (63%). This difference is more pronounced among women—57% of women younger than 55 were satisfied with the distribution of household tasks compared, with 72% of women aged 55 and older.

In terms of sex differences, women (16%) were nearly twice as likely as men (9%) to be dissatisfied with the distribution of household tasks during the pandemic. One-fifth (20%) of both women and men were neither satisfied nor dissatisfied.

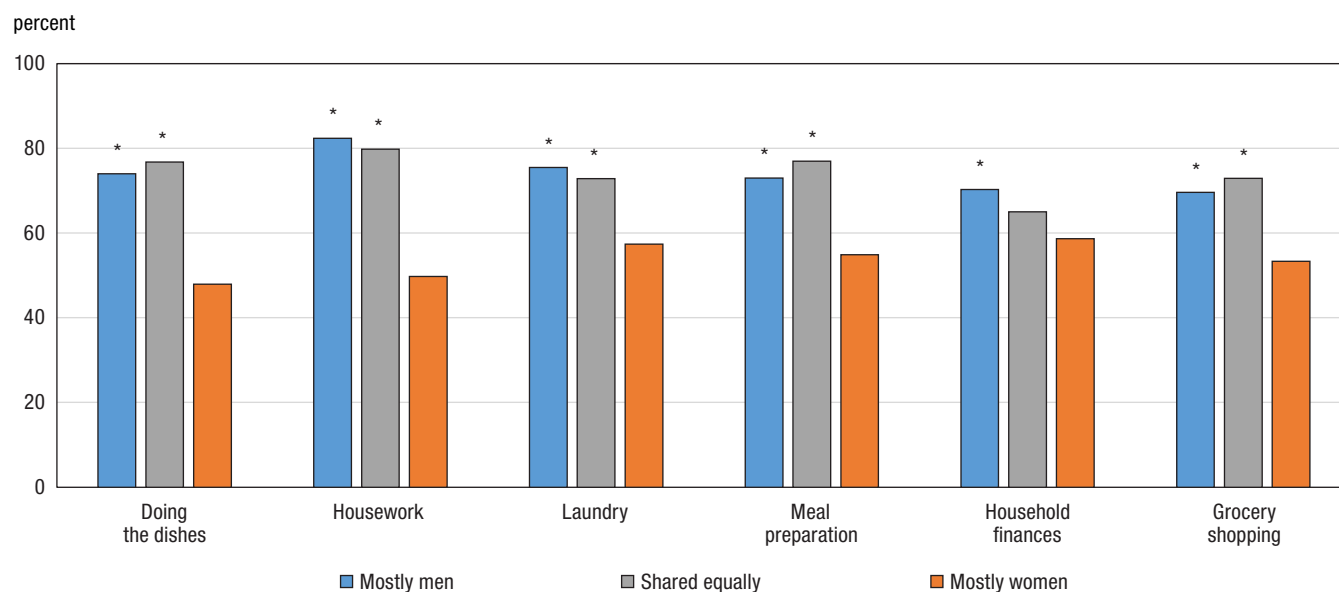
1. Because of the nature of this analysis, which compares how household tasks are distributed by sex, same-sex couples are not included in this study. For the survey, people in same-sex couples represented 0.9% of the Canadian population.
2. Houle, Turcotte and Wendt (2017).
3. This analysis looks at people aged 20 and older who, at the time of collection, lived in the same dwelling as their opposite-sex spouse or common-law partner. One person per household answered the survey. In this analysis and to avoid confusion, the term 'respondent' could be either the woman or the man who answered on behalf of the couple.
4. Statistics Canada (2020b).



Regardless of the task, women were more satisfied when their spouse took care of tasks or when they shared the tasks equally, compared with when they were mostly responsible for them (Chart 1). For example, more women were satisfied with the distribution of housework when this task was mostly done by the man (82%) or shared equally (80%) than when they had to do it themselves (50%).

Chart 1

Proportion of women who reported being satisfied with the distribution of household tasks, by the person who mostly does the task



* significantly different from the estimate for reference category (Mostly women) ($p < 0.05$)

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 3: Resuming economic and social activities during COVID-19, 2020.

Finally, for the vast majority (86%) of people in a couple, the level of satisfaction with the allocation of household tasks was the same as before the pandemic. Men (88%) were more likely than women (83%) to report that their level of satisfaction was the same as before the pandemic.

Just under 1 in 10 Canadians (8%) reported that they were more satisfied with the allocation of household chores during the pandemic than before. Overall, there is no statistically significant difference between the proportions of men (7%⁵) and women (9%) who said their level of satisfaction had improved.

People younger than 55 (10%) were more likely than people aged 55 and older (6%⁶) to report that their level of satisfaction had improved.

Types of household tasks differed between women and men

During the pandemic, the household tasks most likely to be done by women were laundry and meal preparation. Nearly 6 in 10 Canadians (56%) living in a couple reported that the laundry was mostly done by the woman, compared with 16% who said the man mostly undertook this task. About half (48%) said the woman mostly prepared the meals, while only 16% said this task was mostly done by the man (Table 1).

5. Use with caution.

6. Use with caution.



Meanwhile, 4 in 10 people in couples reported that the man mostly took care of the household finances, compared with 30% who said this was done mostly by the woman.

Doing the dishes (45%) and doing housework (43%) were the household tasks most likely to be shared equally between the woman and the man during the pandemic.

Table 1
Distribution of household tasks between women and men

Household tasks	Tasks mostly done by women	Tasks mostly done by men	Tasks shared equally
	percent		
Doing the dishes	31.1	21.7*	44.9*
Housework	42.3	13.7*	42.5
Laundry	55.9	15.8*	27.4*
Meal preparation	47.5	16.1*	35.5*
Household finances	30.3	40.2*	28.9
Grocery shopping	36.6	30.3*	30.7*

* significantly different from the estimate for reference category (Tasks mostly done by women) ($p < 0.05$)

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 3: Resuming economic and social activities during COVID-19, 2020.

Men were more likely to contribute to household tasks during the pandemic than in 2017

Data from the General Social Survey on the distribution of household tasks were used to compare the current situation with the context observed in 2017 (which represents the most recent data from this survey).

Generally speaking, the distribution of household tasks did not change much from 2017⁷ to 2020. However, men were more likely to contribute to household tasks in 2020 than in 2017. Their participation increased for all household tasks. For example, the proportion of men who did the grocery shopping doubled during the pandemic, from 15% to 30%; the same was true for the proportion of men who did the laundry, which went from 8% to 16% (Chart 2). In addition, the proportion of men who took care of household finances rose from 34% in 2017 to 40% in 2020.

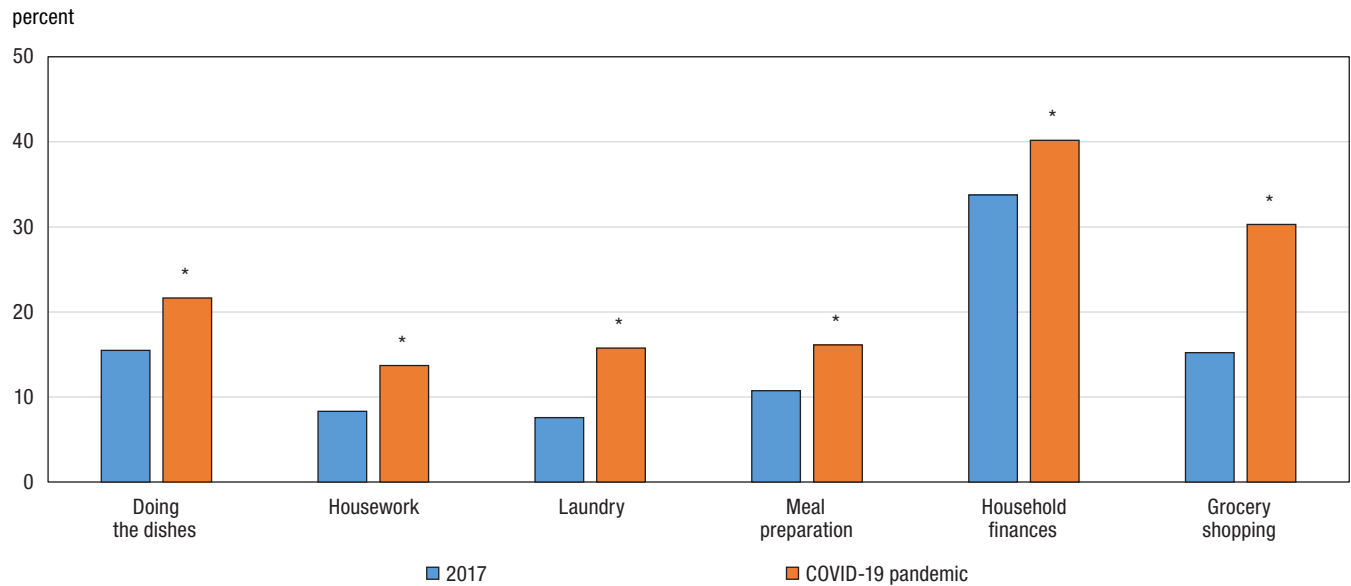
Men's increased contribution to certain household tasks may be attributable to men spending more time at home because of the pandemic. However, the presence of children is also thought to be an important factor. Women who took on care or education of children—an almost continuous responsibility in the first few months of the pandemic—likely had less time for household tasks. Compared with 2017, women's participation in meal preparation and laundry declined during the pandemic (Chart 3), while, on the other hand, women were more likely than men to report that they were mostly responsible for parenting tasks⁸. Specifically, 64% of women were primarily responsible for home schooling and helping with homework, an additional task for parents during the pandemic, versus 19% of men.

7. Statistics Canada (2020a).

8. Leclerc (2020).



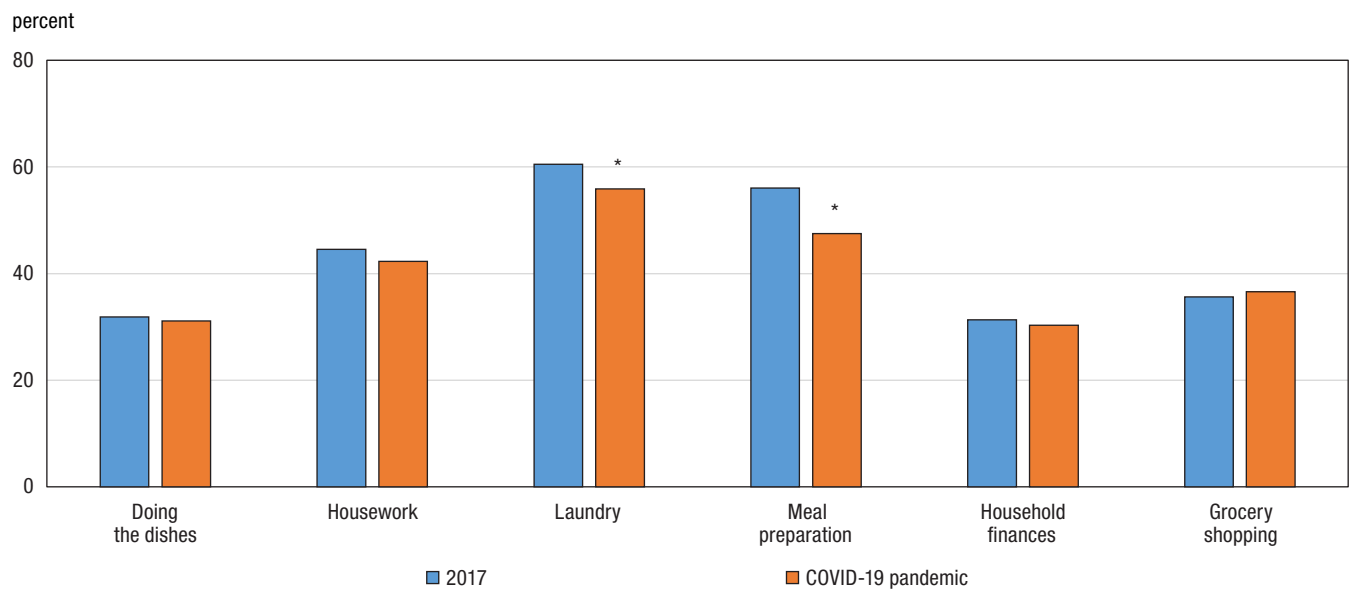
Chart 2
Proportion of people who reported that household tasks were mostly done by men, 2017 and 2020 (COVID-19 pandemic)



* significantly different from the estimate for reference category (2017) ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: Statistics Canada, Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 3: Resuming economic and social activities during COVID-19, 2020; General Social Survey – Family, 2017.

Chart 3
Proportion of people who reported that household tasks were mostly done by women, 2017 and 2020 (COVID-19 pandemic)



* significantly different from the estimate for reference category (2017) ($p < 0.05$)

Sources: Statistics Canada, Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 3: Resuming economic and social activities during COVID-19, 2020; General Social Survey – Family, 2017.



The presence of children younger than 6 in the household affected men’s participation in certain household tasks

The presence of young children in the household has an impact on the distribution of household tasks, particularly for men. About one-third (30%) of Canadians said grocery shopping was mostly done by the man. However, this proportion increased to 42% when there was at least one child younger than 6 in the household (Table 2).

Conversely, housework was half as likely to be done mostly by the man when there were children younger than 6 in the household (7%) than when there were no children or only adult children (16%).

Table 2
Proportion of people who reported that household tasks were mostly done by the man, by the age of the youngest child in the household

Household tasks	Presence of children under the age of 6 in the household	Presence of children between 6 and 17 years in the household	No children or only adult children in the household
	percent		
Doing the dishes	24.4	19.3	21.6
Housework	7.3* ^E	9.9* ^E	16.3
Laundry	14.0 ^E	14.8 ^E	16.5
Meal preparation	12.5 ^E	13.8 ^E	17.7
Household finances	46.0	36.1	39.9
Grocery shopping	42.1*	28.7	27.8

^E use with caution

* significantly different from the estimate for reference category (No children or only adult children in the household) ($p < 0.05$)

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 3: Resuming economic and social activities during COVID-19, 2020.

Telework does not affect how Canadian couples share household tasks

During the pandemic, telework became far more common. In June 2020, 39%⁹ of Canadians had worked remotely, compared with 17% before the pandemic. Women (44%) were more likely than men (35%) to have worked remotely. Before the pandemic, there was very little difference between men and women (16% versus 18% respectively).

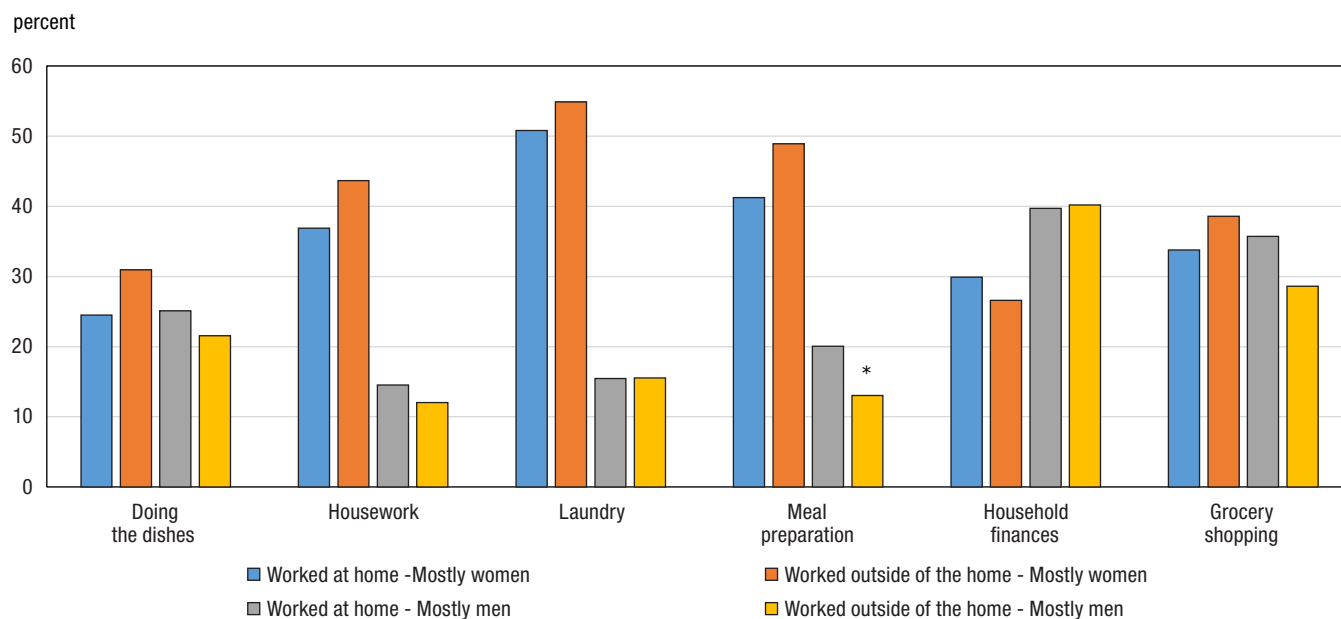
However, telework does not seem to have had an impact on couples’ distribution of household tasks, except for meal preparation by men. Equal proportions¹⁰ of Canadians who worked remotely and who worked outside the home reported that household tasks were mostly done by the woman (Chart 4).

9. This proportion represents approximately 6 million Canadians aged 15 and over and who worked during the reference week.

10. The differences between people who teleworked and those who worked outside the home are not statistically significant.



Chart 4
Distribution of household tasks by work location and sex of the person who mostly does the task



* significantly different from the estimate for reference category (Worked at home - Mostly men) ($p < 0.05$)

Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 3: Resuming economic and social activities during COVID-19, 2020.

Conclusion

Despite women having to balance work and family life now more than ever, they still do most household tasks. Although women were less likely to be mostly responsible for laundry and meal preparation during the pandemic compared with 2017, no significant changes were observed in their participation in other household tasks.

In light of these findings, certain questions arise about whether the trends or changes observed in the early months of the pandemic will remain after life returns to “normal.” Will a new post-pandemic survey confirm the trends observed in 2020, or will it show that these were only temporary changes brought on by exceptional circumstances?

Methodology

The data used in this analysis are from Statistics Canada’s new Canadian Perspectives Survey Series (CPSS), the 2017 General Social Survey (GSS) on Family and the Labour Force Survey (LFS).

The CPSS represents a panel of Canadians who agreed to complete a certain number of short online surveys. Since the CPSS is a probabilistic panel based on the LFS, it is representative of the general population. The CPSS enables Statistics Canada to collect important information from Canadians more effectively, more rapidly and at a lower cost, compared with traditional survey methods. The first iteration of the CPSS took place from March 29 to April 3 and collected information from 4,600 respondents. The second iteration was conducted from May 4 to 10, with most of the same respondents. The third iteration, which was used in this article, took place from June 15 to 21 and had 4,209 respondents. Statistics Canada would like to thank the Canadians who took the time to answer the survey questions during this time of crisis.



CPSS and LFS data were linked to derive two important variables for the analysis (sex of spouse or partner, and presence of children younger than 6 in the household) that were not available in the CPSS.

Finally, the GSS on Family is used to monitor trends and changes that take place in Canadian families. It collects information on conjugal and parental history (chronology of marriages, common-law unions and arrival of children), family history, children leaving parent's home, fertility intentions, and other socioeconomic characteristics. The 2017 GSS target population includes non-institutionalized people aged 15 and older who live in one of the 10 Canadian provinces. This is a sample survey with a cross-sectional design. The data were collected directly from respondents using the computer-assisted telephone interview method.

This analysis looks at people in Canada aged 20 and older who were married or in a common-law union at the time of the survey. Only respondents living in the same dwelling as their opposite-sex spouse or partner were taken into account.

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