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## **Housewives in a dual-earner society** Who is a housewife in contemporary Norway?

**Abstract:**

The number of housewives has declined significantly in most Western countries, but there is now a renewed interest in the homemaker role in the media and public discourse. Utilising representative survey data from 2007 we examine the prevalence and characteristics of the housewife role in present Norway, a social-democratic country with high gender-equality ambitions. Irrespective of the definition used, being a housewife is clearly a minority practice in Norway. About one out of ten partnered women of prime working age either look upon themselves as housewives or work for pay less than 20 hours per week. Housewives are overrepresented among the less educated, those with health restrictions, women with many children and young children, non-Western immigrants and those with a partner with fairly high income. The partners' aggregate income is lower in housewife couples than in other couples, though. Housewives are usually in charge of most domestic chores and report high levels of satisfaction with their division of labour and domestic economy. The analysis does not support the popular notion that today's housewife is primarily a highly educated woman who puts her career on halt, or a rich man's wife who spends her time on leisure activities.

**Keywords:** Housewife, gender, equality, labour market, unpaid work.

**JEL classification:** J13, J21, J22, J23

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## Sammendrag

Med kvinners økte yrkesdeltakelse er den tradisjonelle husmorfamilien med mannen som forsørger og kvinnen som hjemmearbeidende blitt mindre vanlig i de fleste vestlige land. I Norge hadde husmoren sin glansperiode på 1950- og 60-tallet. I dag er det få som er husmødre på heltid, noe som er i tråd med insentivene i den familie- og arbeidsmarkedspolitikken som har vært ført de siste tiårene. Det har imidlertid vært en fornyet interesse for husmorrollen både i media og den offentlige debatt de siste årene, der det blant annet er skapt et inntrykk av at stadig flere kvinner, særlig blant de høyt utdannede, velger å være hjemme noen år.

Basert på representative surveydata undersøker vi i dette paperet hvor stor andel av kvinnene i alderen 25-59 år som er husmødre i dag, hvordan dette varierer mellom grupper av kvinner og hvordan husmødrene skiller seg fra yrkesaktive kvinner når det gjelder husholdningens inntekt og arbeidsdelingen hjemme. Kun 2 prosent av kvinnene er ikke yrkesaktive og betrakter seg selv hovedsakelig som husmødre. Regner vi i tillegg med dem som har en kort deltidsjobb (1-19 timer per uke), men likevel ser seg som yrkesaktive, er det 9 prosent husmødre.

Uansett definisjon er det få husmødre blant alle grupper av kvinner, men det er en viss variasjon. Husmødrene er overrepresentert blant kvinner med kort utdanning og kvinner med nedsatt helse, noe som kan tyde på at få arbeidsmarkedsmuligheter og lite investering i karriere kan trekke i retning av en husmortilpasning. Husmødrene er også overrepresentert blant kvinner med små barn og mange barn, noe som kan tyde på at omsorgsbehovet i familien er viktig for valget om å jobbe lite, eller at kvinner som ønsker å være husmødre velger å få mange barn. Det er også relativt sett flere husmødre blant innvandrere fra såkalt ikke-vestlige land enn i resten av befolkningen. Dette kan ha sammenheng med mer tradisjonelle familieverdier blant innvandrerne, men kanskje også med at de har vanskeligere for å få jobb. Det kan også synes som om det er noe flere husmødre blant gifte enn blant samboende kvinner, noe som kan bunne i at gifte har mer tradisjonelle familieverdier og dessuten fremdeles har sterkere gjensidig forsørgelsesplikt enn samboende.

Som vi kunne vente, har husmødre oftere enn andre kvinner en partner med forholdsvis høy inntekt. Hans høye inntekt kompenserer imidlertid ikke fullt ut for at husmødrene selv har lavere inntekt enn andre kvinner. Parets samlede inntekt er dermed i gjennomsnitt lavere i husmorfamiliene enn i andre familier. Likevel rapporterer husmødrene stor grad av tilfredshet med husholdningens økonomi. Målt ved kvinnes utdanningsnivå og husholdningens inntekt er det ikke først og fremst kvinner fra høyere sosiale lag som er husmødre, men for de fleste vil en partner med forholdsvis høy inntekt være en forutsetning for å kunne velge en tilpasning som husmor. Husmødre har også oftere enn andre kvinner hovedansvaret for arbeidet hjemme, og ytterst få har rengjøringshjelp. De fleste rapporterer likevel høy tilfredshet med husholdningens arbeidsdeling.

# 1. Introduction

The male breadwinner/full-time housewife family has gradually become obsolete throughout the Western world as the dominant normative model for couples. This is particularly so in Norway and other social-democratic countries, where the dual-earner family has been a central political ambition since the 1970s. Several scholars now look to these countries as ideal places for realizing the symmetrical family of two worker-carers (Esping-Andersen, 1999, 2009; Gornick and Meyers, 2003; Hochschild, 1995).

A tremendous shift has taken place regarding women's social and economic role in the last decades. The 1950s and 1960s have been characterised as the golden age of the housewife in Norway (Hagemann and Roll-Hansen, 2005; Knudsen and Wærness, 2001). The builders of the Western post-war welfare states generally assumed that mothers should be housewives, and the family policies encouraged and supported the housewife family longer in Norway than in the other Nordic countries (Skrede, 2004). The number of full-time housewives has now dramatically declined, and women usually have paid work during larger parts of their adult life. Norway comes close to what Lewis (2001) has termed "the adult worker model family", where all adults are assumed to provide for themselves via the labour market. Work and labour market participation are emphasized as the preconditions for welfare (Royal Norwegian Ministry of Labour and Social Inclusion 2006-2007), and due to high economic activity and aging of the population, there is a great demand for labour in Norway today and in the future. It has been contended that while women in the 1950s and 1960s had to defend their choices if they worked for pay, it is now the full-time homemakers who need to stand up for their choices (Danielsen, 2002; Syltevik, 2000).

However, although housewives constitute a small minority in many industrialised countries, there has been a renewed interest in the homemaker role in the media and public discourse. Studies from many countries have documented that large proportions of women would prefer to work less (Böheim and Taylor, 2004; Clarkenberg and Moen, 2001; McDonald Bradley, and Guthrie, 2006; Merz, 2002; Reynolds, 2005; Reynolds and Aletraris, 2006; Torp and Barth, 2001), and media brings interviews with people who have opted out of the labour market or scaled back their career for some years. In the US, both Time (Wallis, 2004) and the New York Times Magazine (Belkin, 2003) have featured cover articles arguing that some mothers - especially older, highly educated mothers - are increasingly "opting out" of employment when they get children, although researchers find no evidence of an increase in the effect of children on the employment rates of professional women (Boushey, 2008). Also in Norway, the media reports of highly educated women who take a career-break in order to

dedicate their time to family and children. This has attracted a lot of attention and left the impression that stay-at-home mothering is now a popular trend among well-educated women, particularly those with a rich husband. There are contrasting views on the legitimacy and status of the homemaker role, though.

Some argue that when taking into account the decline in women's time spent on housework in recent decades, and the high coverage of public childcare in countries like Norway, there is not really enough work in a modern home to occupy a full-time homemaker. Non-employed women are therefore sometimes portrayed as ladies of luxury who spend their time on hobbies and leisure and even purchase domestic services. It has also been maintained that they do not contribute to the welfare of the society. In addition, some argue that in view of the great demand for paid labour, we cannot afford to have healthy adults staying out of the labour force. Others defend women's right to choose between employment and homemaking and claim that housewives provide valuable contributions to their family and society at large. They lessen the family's time crunch and make it easier for their partner to devote himself wholeheartedly to his job. Besides, some argue that it is better for young children to stay at home with their parents than to go to a day-care institution.

Yet, there is scarce research on contemporary homemakers, and little is known about the prevalence, characteristics and time use of this group in modern societies. In this paper we investigate these issues based on recent survey data from Norway. The work is exploratory in character. We ask (1) what the proportion of housewives really is and how it varies between groups of women, (2) what characterises the housewives compared to employed women, and (3) to what extent the housewives differ from employed women when it comes to domestic economy and allocation of family work.

## **2. Work-family policies and practices in Norway**

An important aim of Norwegian work-family policies has been to encourage the combination of employment and family duties for both women and men. Gender equity in paid and unpaid work has been an explicit policy goal, and women's employment rate is now only marginally lower than men's. For instance, in 2010 the employment rates among women and men 25-66 years of age were 76.5 and 82.2 percent, respectively, according to Statistic Norway's Labour Force Survey. Increasing proportions of women work full time, although the part-time rate is still high by international standards. About four out of ten employed women work reduced hours, but this is mostly long part-time arrangements. Contracts of less than 20 hours per week are now fairly uncommon among people of prime working age (Kjeldstad and Nymoene, 2004).

According to collective agreements, the standard working time in Norway is 37.5 hours per week, which is shorter than in many other countries. Moreover, parents in Norway have good access to reduced working hours. The Norwegian Work Environment Act lays down parents' rights to reduced hours, unless this puts the interest of the company seriously at risk, and employment conditions in part-time work are by and large similar to those in full-time work.

Extended parental leave rights combined with improved supply of affordable and high qualitative childcare have facilitated women's labour market participation. Parents are now entitled to 47 weeks of parental leave with 100 percent wage compensation or 57 weeks with 80 per cent compensation. Nine weeks are reserved for the mother (three weeks prior to and six weeks following delivery), and twelve weeks for the father (the father's quota). The remaining weeks may be shared freely between the parents. Parents are also entitled to one year of unpaid leave. Since the late 1980s full coverage of childcare services has been a unified political aim in Norwegian family policy. For a long time demand exceeded supply, but the coverage is now fairly good, even for the youngest children.

Alongside the objective of equal sharing, there is a strong focus on parental choice and flexibility concerning the combination of employment and family in Norwegian policies. This is exemplified by the implementation of the cash for childcare reform in the late 1990s, where one of the goals was to enable parents to spend more time with their children (Ellingsæter, 2007; Rønsen and Kitterød, 2010). It is still primarily women who adapt their paid work to the needs of their family. This adjustment typically entails a long parental leave (paid as well as unpaid) and reduced working hours, but more seldom full-time homemaking. Parental choice concerning the partners' paid working hours may also be supported by the Norwegian tax system in that couples where one partner has no income or a very low income, may claim a larger deductible allowance in their taxes than other couples (Thoresen, 1996).

Most fathers work full time irrespective of the number and ages of children in the family, and large proportions also work long hours. To be sure, there has been an increase in men's unpaid work in recent decades, particularly in their childcare activities (Vaage, 2002) and their take-up of parental leave, but in most couples women still undertake more housework and childcare than men and spend less time in the labour market (Kitterød and Lappegård, 2010). Like the other Scandinavian countries, Norway has a strongly gender-segregated labour market with high percentages of men in the private sector and in manufacturing and finance, and women concentrated in the public sector and in education, health and social work (Anker, 1998; OECD, 2000). Long working hours are widespread in

male-dominated jobs, while normal full hours and part-time contracts are common in typical female jobs. Hence, public-sector jobs are usually depicted as more flexible and family friendly than private-sector jobs (Halrynjo and Lyng, 2009). The wage penalty of children is also smaller in the public sector (Hardoy and Schøne, 2008), which may entail that people lose less in terms of wages from staying at home for some years.

### **3. Various understandings of being a “housewife”**

As there is no standard definition of being a housewife in the research literature, it is not obvious who should be regarded as a housewife. While some emphasize people’s identity as an important criterion, others call attention to the time they spend on housework and childcare. For instance, Danielsen (2002), who conducted in-depth interviews with women who were housewives in Norway in the 1950s, argues that to be a housewife was first and foremost a question of identity at that time. The full-time homemaker who was constantly available for her family with service and care, constituted a powerful norm during the 1950s and -60s, and the respondents were eager to demonstrate that they fulfilled this ideal. It often occurred that they had also worked for pay several hours per week, but this was strongly under-communicated by the women themselves. They portrayed their lives in accordance with the norm of the full-time housewife who was provided for by her husband and only reluctantly talked about their own paid employment.

Following this approach, a housewife might be defined as a woman who considers herself primarily a homemaker, irrespective of her attachment to the labour market. This would agree with the general reporting from the Norwegian Labour Force Survey. Respondents working less than full hours in the labour market are asked what they regard as their main activity or status, and those who consider themselves primarily as “home-working” are classified as such. According to this definition, only 4 percent of Norwegian women in the ages 20-66 years are now housewives. The statistics reveal a dramatic decline in the proportion of housewives in the last decades (Bø and Molden, 2001). There are far fewer full-time housewives than before and also fewer part-time employed women that regard themselves as “home-working”. Part-time workers are increasingly viewing themselves as economically active even if they work rather short hours, which probably reflects the diminishing status of the housewife role (ibid).

Although few women now look upon themselves as home-working, Wærness (2000) contends that many women in Norway are still de facto housewives. She suggests that people carrying the main responsibility for unpaid housework and childcare in a private household should be seen as

housewives, irrespective of their paid working hours. Most women in Norway still spend much time on family duties (Vaage, 2002) and shoulders the family work in their families (Kjeldstad and Lappegård, 2009). Wærness's reasoning, which is in line with the arguments presented by Oakley (1974) in her pioneering study on London-women's housework in the early 1970s, is important in that it attracts attention to the fact that some family work still needs to be done, and that women do the larger share of these duties in most families. However, it does not accommodate well our research questions as the debate on the prevalence and characteristics of today's homemakers in Norway is about women who spend little time in paid employment. In the current study we therefore focus mainly on women who are not employed at all or have very short paid hours.

#### **4. Expected variation between groups of women**

Based on three definitions of being a housewife, we shall explore the proportion of housewives among different groups of women. We focus on the respondent's education, health, domestic responsibilities, marital status, age and immigrant status as well as the partner's socioeconomic resources.

The respondent's educational attainment captures her labour market resources as well as her social status. However, the association between education and a housewife adjustment is not clear beforehand. On the one hand, we may expect to find most housewives among the less educated since they have invested less in qualifying themselves for the labour market and lose less from staying at home or working short hours. On the other hand, the media focus on the popularity of prioritizing the family for some years among well-educated women, suggests that this is primarily an adjustment among the highly educated.

Since bad health may hinder labour market participation, we expect more housewives among women with health limitations than among those without such limitations.

Assuming that family duties and care obligations increase the probability of being a housewife, we look at the importance of number of children, the age of the youngest child as well as the whether the male partner or the respondent's parents have health restrictions.

We also distinguish between formally married and cohabiting women and expect to find more housewives among those who are formally married. Although Norwegian tax policy and the social security system have moved in the direction of equating cohabitation with marriage, married couples still have stronger obligations of mutual economic support than cohabiting couples, and are more likely to pool their economic resources (Lyngstad, Noack, and Tufte,

2010). In addition, married couples probably have more traditional family values than cohabiting couples.

The association between women's age and being a housewife is not clear beforehand. Since younger cohorts meet stronger expectations concerning female employment than those who are older, and also enjoy more favourable conditions of combining work and children, we may expect to find more housewives in the older age groups. However, the media focus on the modern housewives is largely about women in the younger generations.

Assuming more traditional family practices and values among immigrants than in the rest of the population, we expect a higher proportion of housewives among immigrants, particularly those from the so-called non-Western countries.

We regard the male partner's educational attainment as an indicator of the couple's social status. Since the modern housewife is often portrayed as a middle- and upper class phenomenon, we examine whether being a housewife is more common when the male partner is highly educated.

As housewives almost per definition have little earned income themselves, an above average income from the partner may be a prerequisite for such an adjustment. We therefore expect more housewives when the male partner has a high rather than a low income.

## **5. Data and measurements**

### **The survey**

In the empirical analysis we utilise the Norwegian Generations and Gender Survey (GGS), a large representative survey from 2007 that captures a lot of information on peoples' life course and daily life activities. The gross sample consisted of 24,830 respondents 18-79 years old, and the response rate was 60 percent (Bjørshol, Høstmark, and Lagerstøm, 2010). The sample units are individuals, but the respondents provide a great deal of information about their partners as well. The survey data was supplemented with information from Statistics Norway's registers.

We limit our sample to married and cohabiting women 25-59 years of age, with or without children living at home. However, we exclude those with at least one child under the age of one in the household, and women on parental leave. Some of these may regarded themselves as home-working, but this is typically a temporary paid break from the labour market in order to look after a very young

child and does not reflect a choice of being a homemaker for a certain period of time. A small proportion of the respondents who did not answer the question on their weekly working hours, are excluded from the analysis. The final subsample consists of 3,277 women. We do not include men in the analysis since most men work full time, and those who do not, almost never characterise themselves as home workers.

### **Dependent variable: Being a housewife**

We use three different but partly overlapping definitions of being a housewife based on survey information of women's paid working hours and their main status or activity. The survey captured whether people were employed or not as well as their usual weekly working hours. Those who worked for pay at least one hour during the week preceding the survey or were temporary absent from paid work this week, were classified as employed. Irrespective of employment status, all respondents were asked what they considered to be their main activity or status, with the following categories: employed, attending school/study, unemployed, disabled/early retired, retired, home-working, military services, other activities.

According to our first definition (Housewife 1), which is rather narrow, a housewife is a person who looks upon herself mainly as home-working, and is not employed. The second definition (Housewife 2) broadens the concept somewhat and regards a housewife as a person who looks upon herself mainly as home-working, irrespective of employment status. She may in principle be employed on a fulltime basis. The third definition (Housewife 3) is even broader and states that a housewife is a person who looks upon herself primarily as home-working, irrespective of employment status (like housewife 2), or is employed less than 20 hours per week and regards herself primarily as employed. We presume that women working for pay less than 20 hours per week have plenty of time to spend on other matters, for instance domestic work. However, if they regard themselves mainly as a student or disabled they may not have much time or energy to spend on family duties.

### **Independent variables**

*Respondent's educational attainment* is based on register information linked to the survey data. Level of education is defined as the highest level completed at the time of the survey and measured as the accumulated standard number of years it takes to attain a certain level.

*Respondent's health:* Those who report having a long-lasting disease, chronic health problem or permanent disability are said to have health restrictions in the analysis.

*Number of children and age of youngest child:* We distinguish between respondents with no children below 20 years of age in the household, those with the youngest child 1-6 years and one or two children, those with the youngest child 1-6 years and at least three children, those with at the youngest child 7-19 years and one or two children, and those with youngest child 7-19 years and at least three children.

*Parents with health restrictions:* Women who reported that at least one of their parents were severely restricted in their daily activities because of bad physical or mental health, are said to have parents with health restrictions.

*Male partner has health restrictions:* Those who reported that their partner had a long-lasting disease, chronic health problem, disability or psychological problem are said to have a partner with health restrictions.

*Marital status:* We distinguish between formally married and cohabiting women.

*Respondent's age:* We distinguish between the age groups 25-34 years, 35-44 years, and 45-59 years.

*Immigrants* are defined as persons who are born abroad to two foreign-born parents, and who have moved to Norway. We distinguish between immigrants from Asia, Africa, Latin America and Europe outside the EU/EEA (termed non-Western immigrants in the following), and immigrants from other countries (Western immigrants). Since interviews were conducted in Norwegian, the response rate among people with poor language qualifications is probably low and the immigrants in our sample may be the best integrated ones.

*The partner's education:* Information on this is mainly taken from official registers. When the partner could not be identified in the register, the respondent was asked about his educational level. Unfortunately, we lack information on education for about ten percent of the partners.

*The partner's income* is taken from official registers. We look at income after tax and include income from employment, property income and various transfers.

## 6. The proportions of housewives in various groups

Table 1 shows the distribution of self reported main status or activity for women with various weekly working hours in our analysis sample. Looking first at the non-employed (which applies to 11 per cent of the women in our sample), we find that only 20 per cent of these regard themselves primarily as home-working. 42 per cent look upon themselves as disabled or early retirees, whereas 16 per cent regard themselves as students, 7 per cent as unemployed, and 12 per cent report other activities. Looking at women who work for pay 1-19 hours per week, we see that as much as 70 percent of these consider themselves as primarily employed. Only 9 percent reports being primarily home-working. Women working 20 hours or more per week nearly always characterise themselves as employed, but there are also some that look upon themselves as home-working.

**Table 1. Self-reported main activity among married/cohabiting women 25-59 years of age with different employment status and working hours. 2007. Percent**

<b>Self-reported main activity</b>	Non employed	Employed 1-19 hours	Employed 20-36 hours	Employed 37 hours +	All
Gainfully employed	3	70	98	99	85
Student	16	10	1	0	3
Unemployed	7	0	-	0	1
Disability/retirement pension	42	7	0	0	6
Home-worker	20	9	1	0	3
Other	12	3	1	0	2
Total	100	100	100	100	100
Number of respondents	326	252	1031	1668	3277

Applying the Housewife-1 definition, saying that a housewife is a woman who is not employed and looks upon herself as home-working, only 2 percent of our sample are housewives (Table 2). Hence, the 20 percent of the non-employed women who regard themselves mainly as home-workers (table 1) constitute only 2 percent of the total analysis sample. Accordingly, following this narrow definition, there are few housewives in Norway today. Although the Housewife-2 definition is broader in that it includes all women who regard themselves as home-working irrespective of employment status and paid working hours, it adds little to the former one since few employed women look upon themselves as home-working. There are only 3 percent housewives in our sample according to the Housewife-2 definition. Based on the Housewife-3 definition, which says that a housewife is a person who either regards herself mainly as home-working, or works for pay less than 20 hours per week and regards herself as mainly employed, 9 percent of the women in our sample are housewives.

According to all the three definitions above, being a housewife is clearly a minority practice in Norway. Full-time homemaking is very rare, and there are also few who work for pay less than 20 hours per week. Nevertheless, a non-negligible proportion of women have a sort of housewife adjustment.

**Table 2. Percentage of housewives in various groups of women, based on different definitions of being a housewife. Married/cohabiting women 25-59 years of age. 2007. Percent**

	Housewife 1 (Regarding herself as home- working, not employed)	Housewife 2 (Regarding herself as home-working, irrespective of employment)	Housewife 3 (Regarding herself as home-working, or working less than 20 hours per week)	Number of respon- dents
All	2	3	9	3277
<b>Respondent's education</b>				
Primary school	3	5	12	936
Secondary school	2	3	9	798
University, short	1	2	6	1236
University, long	1	2	3	258
Unknown	4	4	10	49
<b>Respondent has health restrictions</b>				
No	2	3	7	2730
Yes	4	6	17	547
<b>Children</b>				
No children in household	2	3	8	1212
Youngest child 1-6 years, 1-2 children	3	3	8	592
Youngest child 1-6 years, 3 children +	6	9	18	293
Youngest child 7-19 years, 1-2 children	1	2	7	982
Youngest child 7-19 years, 3 children +	3	4	10	198
<b>Parents with health restrictions</b>				
No	2	3	5	2750
Yes, one or both parents	1	3	9	527
<b>Male partner has health restrictions</b>				
No	2	3	8	2892
Yes	2	2	9	385
<b>Marital status</b>				
Formally married	2	4	9	2488
Cohabiting	2	2	6	789
<b>Age</b>				
25-34 years	2	3	7	643
35-44 years	2	3	9	1170
45-59 years	3	3	9	1464
<b>Immigrant</b>				
Non immigrant	2	3	8	3096
Immigrant from Western countries	4	6	8	82
Immigrant from non-Western countries	8	8	16	99
<b>Male partner's education</b>				
Primary school	2	4	11	774
Secondary school	3	4	10	1068
University, short	2	3	6	716
University, long	2	3	6	388
Unknown	3	3	7	331
<b>Male partner's income after tax</b>				
- 299,000 NOK	2	3	9	1118
300,000-399,000 NOK	2	2	6	1357
400,000- 499,000 NOK	3	5	12	371
500,000 NOK +	5	6	12	431

Table 2 shows the proportions of housewives in various groups of women based on the three housewife definitions discussed above. Although being a housewife is rare in all groups, there are

some notable differences, particularly when we employ the broadest definition (Housewife 3). The bivariate associations in table 2 suggest that being a housewife is most common among women with modest educational attainments, women with health restrictions, women with at least three children in the household, of which at least one is below seven years of age, non-Western immigrants, women with a less educated partner, and women with a partner who has a reasonably high income. Having parents or a partner with health restrictions seems to be of minor importance, and there are also small differences between married and cohabiting women and between women in various age groups.

## **7. Factors promoting a housewife adjustment. Results from multivariate analyses**

In order to get a better understanding of the characteristics of today's housewives, we have run a number of multivariate regressions. Since the Housewife-2 definition adds little compared to the Housewife-1 definition, we focus on the Housewife-1 and Housewife-3 definitions in the remaining part of the paper. They constitute our dependent variables in the multivariate analysis below. We run two independent logistic regressions for each of them. We estimate the odds of being a housewife rather than working long part time (20-36 hours per week) as well as the odds of being a housewife rather than working full time (at least 37 hours per week).<sup>1</sup> Results are shown in table 3.<sup>2</sup> All estimates are reported as odds ratios. This means that the reference group of a categorical variable is set to 1, while coefficients above 1 indicate a positive association and coefficients below 1 indicate a negative association. Coefficients significant at the 0.05-level are written in bold and those significant at the 0.10-level are written in italics.

By and large, the multivariate analyses support the results from table 2. Looking at the Housewife-1 regressions, we see that highly educated women have lower odds of being a full-time housewife compared to those with less education. This is true whether we compare being a housewife with working part time or working full time, but the contrasts are generally larger when compared with full time. In accordance with expectations, health restrictions for the woman herself increase the odds of being a housewife, and the same is true for having young children and many children in the household. Contrary to our assumptions, having at least one parent with health limitations seems to decrease the

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<sup>1</sup> We have also estimated the odds of being a housewife rather than belonging to the remaining group of women, but as this group is very heterogeneous, the estimates are difficult to interpret. For instance, if we employ the Housewife-3 definition, the remaining group of women encompasses all non-employed women who do not look upon themselves as home working, as well as women employed 1-19 hours per week, who do not consider themselves as employed or home working. This means that both students, unemployed and disabled women are included.

<sup>2</sup> Dummies for "unknown" were included for respondent's and partner's education, but results are not reported.

odds of being a full-time homemaker compared to working full time. We do not know how to explain this result. There is, however, no association between being a full-time homemaker and the partner's health, the respondent's marital status or the respondent's age. In line with expectations we find higher odds of being a full-time housewife among immigrants than non-immigrants, and this is particularly true for non-Western immigrants. The multivariate analyses reveal no associations between being a full-time housewife and the male partner's educational attainment, but demonstrate higher odds of being a housewife when the partner has a high rather than a low income.

**Table 3. Logistic regressions of being a housewife rather than working long part time (20-36 hours per week) and rather than working full time (at least 37 hours per week). Odds ratios**

	Housewife 1		Housewife 3	
	vs long part time (N=1102)	vs full time (N=1793)	vs long part time (N=1308)	vs full time (N=1946)
<b>Respondent's education (ref: primary school)</b>				
Secondary school	<i>0.53</i>	<b>0.47</b>	<i>0.73</i>	<b>0.55</b>
University, short	<b>0.34</b>	<b>0.32</b>	<b>0.46</b>	<b>0.36</b>
University, long	0.38	<b>0.12</b>	<i>0.44</i>	<b>0.12</b>
<b>Respondent has health restrictions (ref: no)</b>				
Yes	<b>3.94</b>	<b>6.00</b>	<b>3.65</b>	<b>6.70</b>
<b>Children (ref: no children in household)</b>				
Youngest child 1-6 years, 1-2 children	1.69	<b>3.86</b>	1.03	<b>2.03</b>
Youngest child 1-6 years, 3 children +	<b>3.73</b>	<b>11.05</b>	<b>2.08</b>	<b>5.29</b>
Youngest child 7-19 years, 1-2 children	0.54	0.79	0.84	1.08
Youngest child 7-19 years, 3 children +	1.75	1.85	1.52	1.57
<b>Parents with health restrictions (ref: no)</b>				
Yes, one or both parents	0.54	<i>0.45</i>	1.11	1.11
<b>Male partner has health restrictions (ref: no)</b>				
Yes	0.89	0.86	1.18	0.98
<b>Marital status (ref: formally married)</b>				
Cohabiting	1.29	1.18	<i>0.75</i>	<i>0.69</i>
<b>Age (ref: 25-34 years)</b>				
35-44 years	0.67	0.82	<i>0.65</i>	0.77
45-59 years	1.11	2.17	0.65	1.02
<b>Immigrant (ref: non immigrant)</b>				
Immigrant from Western countries	2.87	2.38	0.91	0.77
Immigrant from non-Western countries	<b>7.97</b>	<b>6.43</b>	<b>2.16</b>	1.88
<b>Male partner's education (ref: primary school)</b>				
Secondary school	0.74	1.16	0.76	1.08
University, short	0.62	0.82	<i>0.66</i>	0.77
University, long	0.92	0.66	0.79	0.66
<b>Male partner's income (ref: - 299,000 NOK)</b>				
300,000-399,000 NOK	1.04	0.94	0.93	0.93
400,000- 499,000 NOK	1.63	<b>2.44</b>	<i>1.45</i>	<b>2.14</b>
500,000 NOK +	<b>4.30</b>	<b>5.58</b>	<b>1.89</b>	<b>2.59</b>

Bold:  $p \leq 0.05$ , italics:  $p \leq 0.10$ .

On the whole, the Housewife-3 regressions show similar results to the Housewife-1 regressions. We find, however, a negative role of marital status when estimating the odds of being a housewife defined as Housewife 3 rather than working full time. This means that cohabiting women are less likely than married women to have a Housewife-3 adjustment compared to working full time, which is in

agreement with our initial expectation. The association is, however, only marginally significant. Moreover, we find no significant importance of being a Western immigrant in the Housewife-3 regressions, only of being a non-Western immigrant. Although still significantly positive, the association with the partner's income is somewhat more modest in the Housewife-3 regressions than in the Housewife-1 regressions. This is as expected since Housewife-1 women have no paid work, while women in the Housewife-3 group may work short part-time.

Our conclusion so far is therefore that modest labour market resources in terms of little education and bad health are more important for a housewife adjustment today than is a long education for the women or her partner. Caring obligations in the household also play an important role. The high proportions of housewives among non-Western immigrants suggest more traditional family values and practices in this group, but may also reflect difficulties in getting a job. There is, however, a positive association between the partner's income and the likelihood of being a housewife, especially a full-time housewife. We do not know whether the partner has increased his income as a consequence of the woman's wish to stay at home, or whether the partner initially had sufficient income for his wife to be able to choose a housewife adjustment. In any case, it seems that a certain amount of income from the partner may be a prerequisite for the woman to be able to stay at home or work very short hours.

## **8. Domestic economy and division of housework**

To get an even better understanding of who today's housewives are we also present some descriptive statistics on their domestic economy and division of unpaid family work in the household. When income is concerned, we look at both partners' income as well as the couples' total income among the housewives (Housewife 1 and Housewife 3), and compare these measures to the corresponding figures among full-time-working women and all women in our sample. We also show the composition of various groups with regard to the women's educational attainment (table 4). We have tested the statistical significance of the differences between Housewife 1 and full-time-working women, as well as the differences between Housewife 3 and full-time-working women. Significant differences are marked with an asterisk in the table.

The partner of a full-time homemaker (Housewife 1) has an average income after tax amounting to 508,000 NOK (about 64,000 EUR), which is considerably more than the partner of a full-time employed woman. This agrees with the results from the multivariate analysis above. There is also a considerable, although less modest, difference between the income of the Housewife-3 partners and the partners of the full-time-working women. Looking at the women's own income, we find, as

expected, that the housewives have considerably lower income than the full-time-working women, and that the full-time homemakers (Housewife 1) have least income. It may be surprising that the latter group has any income at all, but it is important to remember that we include earned income as well property income and transfers.

**Table 4. Income and domestic economy among housewives, full-time working women, and all women. Married/cohabiting women 25-59 years of age. 2007. Percent and averages**

	Housewife 1	Housewife 3	Employed full time	All women
<b>Male partner's income after tax</b>				
-299,000 NOK	*27	*36	32	34
300,000- 399,000 NOK	28	30	46	42
400,000 -499,000 NOK	16	17	10	12
500,000 NOK +	29	17	12	13
Average	*508 000	*420 000	374 000	383 000
<b>Respondent's income after tax</b>				
- 199,000 NOK	*91	*72	10	30
200,000-299,000 NOK	5	22	54	48
300,000 NOK +	4	6	36	22
Average	*90 000	*159 000	291 000	245 000
<b>Couple's income after tax</b>				
- 499,000 NOK	*52	*45	16	26
500,000-599,000 NOK	16	24	26	28
600,000- 699,000 NOK	13	16	30	24
700,000 NOK +	18	15	28	22
Average	(*)598 000	*579 000	665 000	628 000
<b>Respondent's education</b>				
Primary school	*53	*50	29	36
Secondary school	20	25	25	24
University, short	20	21	34	31
University, long	4	2	11	6
Unknown	4	3	1	2
<b>Difficult to make ends meet?</b>				
Difficult	(*)18	*21	11	15
Rather easy	36	32	30	31
Easy, very easy	46	48	59	54
<b>Is there usually money left after payment of bills and expenses?</b>				
Yes	*60	*66	83	79
No	40	34	17	21
<b>Satisfaction with domestic economy</b>				
Score 0-6 (least satisfied)	25	*30	18	23
Score 7-8	38	38	45	42
Score 9-10 (most satisfied)	37	32	37	36
Number of respondents	71	282	1668	3277

\*:  $p \leq 0.05$  for being different from full-time working women

(\*):  $p \leq 0.10$  for being different from full-time working women

Aggregating the partners' incomes, we find that the housewife couples have on the average a lower total income than couples with a full-time-working woman. Thus, the higher income of the partner does not fully compensate for the woman's lower income in the housewife family. Altogether, it

seems that both the Housewife-1 family and the Housewife-3 family have less money to spend than families with a full-time-working woman.

Table 4 further demonstrates that housewives generally have lower educational attainments than full-time working women. While 24 percent of the Housewife-1 group and 23 percent of the Housewife-3 group have a university education, this applies to 45 percent of the fulltime working women. Likewise, about half of the housewives have not finished a secondary education, compared to 29 percent of the full-time working women.

The somewhat lower income of the housewife couples is also reflected in the ways people experience the household's domestic economy, but the vast majority of both housewives and full-time-working women seem to be fairly content with the way things are. Being asked how easy or difficult it was to make ends meet in their household, somewhat larger percentages of the housewives than of the full-time-working women reported some difficulties (table 4). In all groups, however, the greater part reported that meeting ends was rather easy or very easy. Housewives more often than full-time-working women reported that there was usually no money left after bills and expenses had been paid, but at least 60 per cent in both groups of housewives reported that there was actually some money left. Being asked about their overall contentment with the domestic economy, housewives reported a slightly lower degree of satisfaction than full-time-working women, but the difference is modest and statistically significant only for the Housewife-3 group. The vast majority in all groups chose a score of at least 7 when asked to indicate their contentment on a scale ranging from 0 to 10, where 10 mean most contentment.

All things considered it appears that both full-time and part-time housewives have a slightly tighter domestic economy than full-time-working women and women in general, but the difference is modest and most housewives seem to have adjusted their expectations to their budget constraints.

As mentioned in the introduction, today's housewives in Norway are sometimes portrayed as ladies of luxury who prioritize their leisure activities above housework. Our survey data provide little information on the respondents' time spent on family work and leisure, but they were asked about the division of domestic duties in their household. These questions may tell whether housewives take more domestic responsibility than full-time-working women. We also utilise information on the purchase of private cleaning services and look at women's contentment with their division of domestic chores.

Respondents were asked how the following tasks were allocated between themselves and their partner: Preparing daily meals, doing the dishes, washing clothes, shopping for food, cleaning the house, and doing small repairs in and around the house. Each question had six possible answers, namely “Always respondent”, “Usually respondent”, “Respondent and partner equally often”, “Usually partner”, “Always partner”, and “Always or usually another person”, which we collapsed into the following three categories: (1) mainly she (respondent) (2) equal share (3) mainly he (partner). “Always or usually another person” was coded as (2) equal share, but very few gave this answer. Results are shown in table 5.

**Table 5. Division of housework, satisfaction with division of housework and purchase of domestic cleaner among housewives, full-time working women, and all women. Married/cohabiting women 25-59 years of age. 2007. Percent**

	Housewife 1	Housewife 3	Employed full time	All women
<b>Preparing daily meals</b>				
Mainly she	*88	*77	51	60
Equal share	12	19	34	29
Mainly he	-	4	15	11
<b>Doing the dishes</b>				
Mainly she	*59	*52	34	39
Equal share	35	42	56	52
Mainly he	6	6	10	9
<b>Washing clothes</b>				
Mainly she	*93	*89	75	79
Equal share	7	9	21	17
Mainly he	-	2	4	3
<b>Shopping for food</b>				
Mainly she	*53	*53	39	44
Equal share	40	37	49	45
Mainly he	7	9	12	10
<b>Cleaning and clearing up the house</b>				
Mainly she	*85	*73	53	59
Equal share	15	26	44	39
Mainly he	0	0	4	3
<b>Repairs in and around the house</b>				
Mainly she	*15	*8	5	5
Equal share	20	17	22	19
Mainly he	64	75	74	76
<b>Satisfaction with division of domestic work</b>				
Score 0-6 (least satisfied)	17	18	21	21
Score 7-8	32	34	36	38
Score 9-10 (most satisfied)	51	47	43	42
<b>Domestic cleaner</b>				
Yes	*1	*4	11	9
Number of respondents	71	282	1668	3277

\*:  $p \leq 0.05$  for being different from full-time working women

The majority of the housewives report doing the greater part of most domestic chores. Although full-time-working women, too, often do the larger share of some housework tasks, this is more common among the housewives. For instance, 88 percent of the full-time housewives (Housewife 1) and 77 percent of the part-time housewives (Housewife 3) were mainly responsible for preparing the daily meals, whereas the corresponding proportion of the full-time-working women was 51 percent. Full-time-working women more often share domestic tasks equally with their partner than do housewives, but in all groups it is pretty rare that the housework is mainly done by the male partner. Maintenance work such as repairs in and around the house is an exception, though, as this is mainly conducted by the male partner in all couples, although a slightly higher percentage of the housewives than of the full-time-working women report that they themselves most often do the repairs. It is important to remember, though, that people in general spend far less time on maintenance work than on routine housework (Vaage, 2002).

Purchasing domestic cleaning services is rather uncommon in Norway. Only 9 percent of the women in our sample buy such services, and the practice is very unusual among housewives. Even full-time-working women rarely have a private cleaner; only 11 percent according to our data.

In general, housewives seem to be fairly content with their division of domestic duties. When asked to indicate their satisfaction on a scale ranging from 0-10, where 10 involved most satisfaction, about half of the housewives chose one of the two highest scores, and less than one fifth decided on a score below seven. There is almost no difference between housewives and full-time-working women in this respect. This suggests that housewives generally believe it is fair that they are responsible for most domestic duties, which is not surprising considering that most of them spend little time on paid employment.

## **9. Discussion**

In many countries, women now participate in the labour market during most of their adult life, which is in accordance with the work-family policies of the last decades. In Norway, the part-time rate is still high by international standards, but women increasingly work long part-time hours and rarely look upon themselves as housewives. Yet, we have witnessed a renewed interest for the home-maker role in the media and public discourse lately, and similar debates have also received much interest in other countries. There is little systematic knowledge about the prevalence and characteristics of today's housewives, however. Utilising Norwegian representative survey data from 2007, we hope to contribute to the understanding of the housewife adjustment in contemporary societies.

Homemaking is now clearly a minority practice in Norway. Only 2 percent of all partnered women 25-59 years of age consider themselves a housewife and do not work for pay at all. Including those who work for pay less than 20 hours per week, we find that 9 percent are housewives in Norway. The modern housewife is sometimes portrayed as a rich man's wife who spends her time on leisure activities and outsources domestic duties, or a highly educated woman who takes a career break in order to take care of the family. Our analyses only partly support such a notion. To be sure, housewives, and particularly those who are housewives on a full-time basis, more often than other women have a high-income partner and may thus be characterised as privileged women who have the opportunity to dedicate themselves to family and leisure activities. A high income from the partner obviously facilitates a housewife adjustment, but nevertheless, a non-negligible proportion of the housewives have a partner with a fairly low income. This is particularly true for the part-time working housewives (Housewife 3). Moreover, looking at the couple's total income the housewife couples are less well off than couples in general, and especially those with a full-time working woman.

The housewives also tend to be less educated than the full-time working women, which contradicts the popular notion of the modern housewife as a highly educated woman who prioritizes family and leisure above paid work. Certainly, there are some housewives among women at all educational levels, but irrespective of the definition used the housewives are clearly overrepresented among the less educated, and also among those with health restrictions, women with many children and young children, and non-Western immigrant women. Hence, both small labour market resources and comprehensive caring obligations increase the likelihood of a housewife adaptation.

According to the analysis in this paper, most housewives shoulder the vast majority of the unpaid family work, and few have a domestic cleaner. Hence, the popular notion of today's housewives as ladies of luxury who spend their time on leisure activities is not supported by our data.

Although many questions are left unanswered, we believe that the current paper may form the basis for a more informed debate on the prevalence, characteristics and time use of the housewives in a social democratic country with active gender equality policies coupled with a strong emphasis on people's right to choose how to combine family and employment.

The analysis would, however, have benefited from more complete information on the respondents' time use. We have looked at the division of domestic duties, but lack information on people's absolute time inputs. Hence, we do not know how much time housewives spend on family work compared to

other women. We would also have liked to have data on leisure activities in order to see whether housewives have more leisure time than other women and spend their leisure differently. Still another question for future analysis would be whether the housewife practice in present day's Norway is really a voluntary adjustment, or comes about as a result of constraints such as lack of satisfactory childcare, lack of job opportunities or health restrictions. The fact that the housewives in our study express high contentment with their domestic economy as well as their division of family labour indicates that they have deliberately chosen such an arrangement. However, what we observe may also be an adjustment to the actual situation. We have learned that housewives often have a partner with a high income, which may entail long working hours. An additional analysis (not shown) revealed that the partners of the women in the Housewife-1 group on average work significantly longer hours than the partners of the full-time-employed women. This may impede the woman's labour market participation, but it may also be an arrangement that the partners have agreed upon in order for the wife to be able to stay at home. Hopefully, such questions can be addressed more thoroughly in future research.

Although practiced by few, the housewife role has attracted a lot of attention in the public discourse lately in Norway as in some other countries. It remains to be seen whether there will be a revival of this adjustment in the years to come. Considering Norway with its high demand for labour, its active and inclusive labour-market policy as well as the high coverage of affordable and high quality childcare, we believe that the housewife arrangement will remain a minority practice in the foreseeable future.

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