Want hubby to do the dishes? Live together first

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By Alison McCook

NEW YORK (Reuters Health) - Couples who live together before tying the knot are more likely than those who don't to share the burden of routine household tasks traditionally assigned to wives, US researchers report.

Moreover, Jeanne A. Batalova and Dr. Philip N. Cohen of the University of California, Irvine found that in countries with higher rates of pre-nuptial cohabitation, housework duties were more equally balanced between couples, even among those who had not lived together before marriage.

"Cohabitation rates, as a characteristic of society, seemed to be a predictor of gender equality, even if the couples didn't cohabitate," Cohen told Reuters Health.

"The level of premarital cohabitation may be an indicator of the level of gender equality," the researcher added. "Probably, there is something about these societies that is causing both of those things."

These trends are important to investigate, the authors note, given the steady increase in the proportion of couples who choose to live together before marriage, which practically tripled between 1977 and 1994 in the US. Northern and western Europe, including the UK, are also seeing increases in cohabitation rates. Although the precise reasons behind this increase remain unclear, some researchers have proposed that the trend is due to increases in anti-marriage sentiment and the availability of birth control, as well as the potential for cohabitation to cut costs.

Batalova and Cohen uncovered the relationship between cohabitation and housework using data from 22 countries. In each of the samples, married couples reported on the division of labor within the house and qualities of themselves and their spouses. The results are based on responses from 17,849 people.

The authors specifically examined couples' tendencies to share household tasks traditionally assigned to women: laundry, caring for sick family members, grocery shopping and planning meals. Since these tasks are often assigned to women, the researchers reasoned that households in which husbands take on more of the tasks are less influenced by traditional gender roles.

"In other words, husbands doing more [traditionally] female tasks suggest improving gender equality at home," Batalova and Cohen write in the August issue of the Journal of Marriage and Family.

The authors found that in all countries, women tend to take on more than half of the household chores. Among the countries included in the study, husbands took on more or less of these routine tasks depending on where they lived, with men tending to pitch in the most in Norway and the US, but abstaining from the most housework in Italy and Japan.

Furthermore, the authors note, couples who did not live together before marriage, but live in countries where traditional gender roles are weaker and couples often cohabitate before marriage, also tend to exhibit a more equal division of labor in their own households.

In an interview with Reuters Health, Cohen said that couples who have less traditional gender roles may be more likely than others to cohabitate. Alternatively, he suggested that there may be something about the act of cohabitation that helps couples abandon their tendencies to divide household chores according to gender.

"It's possible that the cohabitation experience itself has some of that equalizing effect," Cohen suggested.

Cohen suggested that couples who live together without a long-term commitment of marriage may be less likely to "specialize" in certain household tasks, for if the relationship ends, they would have no idea how to deal with the jobs that fell under their partners' domain.

In such a potentially temporary situation, "there's more incentive for sharing these kind of chores," Cohen said.