A Couple's Work: Study Says Unmarried Pairs Split Chores Better

The egalitarian model for modern couples goes something like this: A man and woman both work, divide the household chores, and live together in harmony.

New studies find that this model applies fairly well for men and women who live together, but not for couples who tie the knot. Marriage, sociologists say, brings with it powerful social traditions that cause women to do a far greater share of housework - often twice as much - even when both spouses work and don't have children. Cohabitation doesn't come with the "good wife" image, so women who simply live with a man don't carry as great a housework load.

"Marriage still has a very powerful effect on people, even if they don't realize it," said Melissa Milkie, a University of Maryland sociologist. "When you marry, you get a list of expectations about the good wife and the good husband. When you cohabit, you're just sharing a household."

Joy Clark, 30, who married her husband in May after living with him for more than a year, said becoming a "wife" changed what others expected of her. Both civil engineers from North Andover, she and her husband have always shared cooking, dishes, and laundry fairly equally - and now she's worried she's being judged by relatives as unwifely because of it.

"It's as if I should now be taking care of my husband and creating my nest," she said.

New studies comparing live-in and married couples give researchers a novel way to show just how social traditions - the nurturing wife and the money-earning husband - continue to affect today's working couples. Sociologists have long known the importance of other factors in explaining the imbalance in chores, including each spouse's work hours and earnings, educational levels and the presence of children.

But these factors never fully explained one persistent finding: In study after study, men never shared equally in the drudgery of routine household work, such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry, even when they worked fewer hours or earned less money than their wives. Several studies in the past year put a married man's contribution to housework at anywhere from seven to 10 hours a week, compared to a wife's contribution of 18 or 20 hours a week. The range depended on whether the definition of chores went beyond daily tasks to include raking leaves, paying bills, and maintaining the car.

Using the more liberal definition of household chores, a University of Maryland study this year found that typical wives spent an average of about 18 hours a week on housework, eight hours more a week than their husbands. In dual-income couples, the gap decreased but working women still did about six more hours of chores than men, researchers say.

In trying to understand the imbalance, several sociologists embarked on studies of cohabitating couples to see how men and women - free of marriage's social norms - divided household chores. In all these studies, they found that cohabitating couples shared more equitably (though women still did quite a bit more) and they also were happier as a result of such a balanced a-

range.