

# **Bargain or Autonomy? A Comparative Study of Housework in China, Taiwan and Hong Kong**

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During recent decades, women have increased their participation in paid work, narrowed or reversed their education gap relative to men, and improved their presence in almost all high-status occupations. Despite those substantial improvements, one aspect of women's lives has failed to keep pace with other positive changes: housework. Although housework division is only one aspect of marriage, gender inequality in households puts women at a disadvantage relative to their husbands in terms of labor force outcomes, marriage satisfaction, psychological well-being, and other aspects of life quality.

In an effort to understand women's domestic labor, a number of individual- and household-level hypotheses have been tested. Among them, the debate on relative resources perspective and autonomy perspective seems to be attracting the most attention recently. The relative resources perspective contends that the division of housework reflects the power relation between the husband and the wife. In other words, the relative amount of resources household members bring to the family determines the allocation of domestic work. The increase in wife's relative earning thus could help them to reduce housework. When testing the relative resources hypothesis, some scholars found that the wife's increasing share of income could not help continuously decrease her housework time, and they labeled this phenomenon "gender display", which refers to the hypothesis that when women outearn their husbands, they will do more housework than those whose earnings resemble those of their husbands in order to compensate for their deviation from gender norms. Essentially, "gender display" shows how the effect of wife's relative resources in reducing housework time is limited by traditional gender ideology held by wives. However, some recent studies have challenged the relative resources perspective and "gender display" hypothesis. They propose the autonomy perspective, arguing that the wife's own earnings are a much better

predictor of her time spent in household labor, as it is economically rational for her to reduce housework time when her earnings increase. More money allows her, with diminishing returns, to purchase market substitutes for domestic labor. Hence, this mechanism predicts monotonic declines in housework time as the wife's earnings increases, regardless of the wife's share of income.

However, earlier studies debating whether relative resources perspective or autonomy perspective is supported suffered from a serious limitation. They invariably focus on a single country and thus did not take social context into consideration. As Blumberg suggests, individual women's power is “nested” in the gender power relationship at the societal level. In this paper, I take a different approach and do not ask whether women’s relative earnings or absolute earnings could help reduce their housework time. Rather, I apply a comparative framework and examine both the relative resources perspective and autonomy perspective in different social contexts.

There is an emerging focus on how social contexts might influence the effects of individual characteristics in determining housework allocation. Context is conceptualized in terms of various factors, such as welfare and other state policies, gender equality level, economic development, and cultural norms. These comparative studies on housework division, however, suffer from a major limitation: cultural context has not been well defined and appropriately controlled for. In this comparative study, I wish to control for potentially confounding macro-level factors such as culture.

My empirical work is situated in Mainland China, Taiwan, and Hong Kong. By the household registration (*hukou*) system, society in Mainland China has been partitioned into two distinct parts: rural and urban. It is necessary to treat rural Chinese and urban Chinese as two separate populations, giving us four cases to study within a comparative framework. In this comparative study, we will focus on two macro-level factors: economic development and gender ideology. Note that mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong share a common culture, as they originated from the same Confucian culture.

*Economic development.* One possible consequence of economic development is a shift to the reallocation of resources and authority on a rational rather than an ascriptive basis, i.e., an erosion of patriarchy and thus a rise of women’s power within the family. As a result,

women might have more autonomy in determining their housework time, and their relative resources might have more bargaining power in the more developed societies. Based on the GDP per capital and other related statistics, among the four cases, Hong Kong is the most economically developed society, and rural China is the least economically developed society, with Taiwan and urban China ranking second and third. From this, I predict that wives in Hong Kong will be most autonomous, and their housework time will decline as long as their own earnings increase despite the change of their relative earnings. In addition, the ability of wife's relative resources in reducing their housework time might be most likely to be limited in rural China, and "gender display" thus will be most likely to exist in rural China.

*Gender ideology.* The economic development level leads us to hypothesize that wives are most autonomous in Hong Kong than in other three societies. However, a negative answer to this hypothesis implies that macro-level factors other than economic development may be at work, disrupting the pattern. To allow for this possibility, we further consider differences between the four societies in political ideologies relating to gender. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, women in mainland China have been encouraged to behave like men in becoming economic providers for their families. Furthermore, fixed wages for each level of worker were set so low that the husband's income alone could not support a whole family. Thus, Chinese women have been compelled to work as family breadwinners. Such propaganda has been quite successful, and its influence has persisted even during the reform and open era. Compared to married women in rural China, married women in urban China have been more deeply imbued with the ideology that they should earn money for the family and maintain equal status with their husbands within the family. In the case of Taiwan and Hong Kong, the situation is quite different. Although women are also encouraged to participate in work, no political ideology encourages women to be family breadwinners. Studies show that the traditional Chinese gender division of labor has not changed in Taiwan and Hong Kong, yet the labor force participation rate of married women is a little higher in Hong Kong than in Taiwan. Since women's behavior in domestic labor might be largely determined by their gender norms, the macro-level ideological environment may have overriding influence over macro-level economic development in affecting women's economic autonomy in reducing housework time.

Comparing Mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, this study evaluates the relative importance of wives' relative resources and absolute earnings in reducing their housework time across the four different societies. For this study, I analyze data from Panel Study of Family Dynamics (PSFD) of Taiwan (2006), Chinese Family Panel Study of Mainland China (2010), and Hong Kong Panel Study of Social Dynamics (HKPSSD). All of the three surveys are representative of the whole society, and collected detailed socioeconomic information about the interviewed individual and his or her spouse, as well as other family members. After deleting observations with missing variables, the final sample consisted of 832 couples from Taiwan, and 4317 couples from urban China, 1666 couples from urban China, and 1241 couples from Hong Kong.

To examine the relative resources perspective and autonomy perspective, I use OLS regression including controls such as working time, age and education. The preliminary results show that: (1) increases in wives' relative resources are significant in reducing their housework time in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and rural China, but not for urban China; (2) instead of using relative resources to bargain, wives in urban China only use increase in their own earnings to reduce housework time; (3) gender display exists in Hong Kong and Taiwan, but not in mainland China, and it is more pronounced in Taiwan than in Hong Kong. As the results is consistent with the pattern of ideological environment of these four societies, it suggests that the ability of wife's economic resources in reducing housework time depends more on gender ideology than on macro-level economic development. In societies with less equal gender ideology, wives' relative earnings are more influential, because the reduction in their housework time is largely led by bargaining on housework division with the husbands. While in societies with more equal gender ideology, instead of bargaining, wives could autonomously reduce their housework time by purchasing market substitutes as their own income increases. In general, this study contributes to the housework literature by situating debate between relative resources and autonomy perspective in different societies, and its findings remind us that the influence of wives' economic resources on their housework time needs to be considered within the social contexts. When married women decide whether to bargain over or autonomously decrease their housework time, their decision is influenced by broader, macro-level factors.