

Summary

Equal shares? The distribution of work and care among same-sex couples

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Summary

This report explored the division of paid and unpaid work among Dutch same-sex couples. We proceeded in three steps: we reviewed the literature, analysed quantitative data comparing heterosexual and same-sex couples, and explored the experiences of same-sex couples through a small qualitative study.

Earlier research into same-sex couples suggests same-sex couples have a more equal division of labour than heterosexual couples. These studies are, however, largely qualitative in nature and tend to focus the US and lesbian couples. Our own analysis of Dutch survey data confirms the expectation that same-sex couples divide paid and unpaid work more equally than heterosexual couples. For example, the likelihood that both partners work part-time or fulltime is higher among same-sex couples. With regard to the division of domestic work, the differences are less clear, but cohabiting women seem to share household tasks more equally than heterosexual couples. Because the data on the division of domestic work is not very detailed and we were unable to analyse the division of child care, it is possible that we were not able to detect more (subtle) differences between same-sex and different-sex couples. In general, the differences between gay and lesbian couples are small. Men who cohabit with a male partner are more likely to work fulltime than women who cohabit with a female partner.

The survey data was also used to explore the question whether respondents in same- and different-sex couples differ in their attitudes with regard to paid and unpaid work. The participants in our study who had a partner of the same sex were more progressive in a number of ways. For example, the LHB-respondents were less likely to agree with the statement that women are more suitable to provide informal care for relatives. Moreover, those with a partner of the same sex attach a higher importance to equality in the couple relationship. These progressive attitudes could explain why same-sex couples divide paid and unpaid labour more equally.

The qualitative study focuses on the experiences of same-sex couples. We interviewed twelve same-sex couples and talked about their division of labour and the rationale behind this. Three central themes emerged. Firstly, those who were interviewed emphasised that the division of labor was based on the preferences and standards of both partners. For example, the partner who most likes to clean – or dislikes this the least – is most responsible for this specific task. Secondly, the interviewees emphasized the importance of an equal division of labor. This does not imply that both partners have to spend exactly the same amount of time on specific tasks, but the couples prefer that both partners participate in paid work and housework. The couples observe a difference between their own division of labour and the more traditional division among heterosexual couples. At the same time, the couples also noted that they were part of progressive networks and that many of their (homo- and heterosexual friends) share paid work and care equally. Thirdly, the couples also mentioned a number of more practical considerations that seem to affect the division of labour. Some couples mention economic considerations (although rarely

explicitly). Moreover, the job characteristics of the partners also played a role: many of the men and women who were interviewed were employed in sectors such as culture and education that provide a lot of flexibility in terms of combining paid or unpaid work. Concluding, the report suggests that people with a partner of the same sex are less likely to conform to gendered role expectations. Their specific circumstances not only inhibit a traditional role pattern, the couples also place greater value on equality. The finding that the division of labour is more equal among these couples than among heterosexual couples suggests that homosexual and bisexual men experience fewer restrictions when it comes to their participation in care work, whereas it provides lesbian and bisexual women with more opportunities to participate on the labour market.