

Household labour allocation among married and cohabiting couples in Italy

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Abstract

The recent years have seen increase in the phenomenon of non-marital unions also in a country such as Italy which is characterized by traditional family behaviours. The present paper aims to study the extent to which marriage and cohabitation differ in the division of household labour within the couple with data from the nationally representative survey “Family and Social Subjects” conducted in Italy in 2003. The article examines the differences between currently married and currently cohabiting couples in their household labour allocation, distinguishing the heterogeneous groups of cohabitations and marriages according to the experience of previous unions. This allows identification of couples in different stages of their life course and to better characterize differences across couples.

Results suggest that, on the one hand, cohabiting couples present more equal arrangements than married ones. Household labour time is, indeed, shared more equally among cohabitations than among marriages, and this is due to fewer hours spent by cohabiting women in household tasks than by their married counterparts. On the other hand, the experience of previous unions does not necessarily mean more equal allocation of household labour in the current union. Having experienced previous unions for married individuals means a more equal allocation of household labour than among married couples in their first unions; however, the same result does not hold for cohabitations. Unions before marriages are predominantly premarital cohabitations and, thus, the patterns established in the cohabitation period are carried over into marriage; in contrast, cohabitations with previous unions are predominantly cohabitations following the end of a previous marriage and, thus, they probably represent particularly selected couples.

Keywords: Household labour allocation, cohabitation, marriage, Italy

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in the phenomenon of non-marital unions. In many European countries, indeed, marriage has lost much of its centrality in the process of family formation and has been gradually replaced by cohabitation, either as a prelude or an alternative to marriage (Bumpass and Lu 2000; Seltzer 2000; Smock and Manning 2004). This increase in cohabitation¹ has been followed by extensive research focused on its exploration.

In fact, the situation is heterogeneous across countries. In particular, consensual unions spread more slowly in Italy (but, more generally, in Southern Europe) than in other areas (Kiernan 2002). However, recently, cohabitations start their diffusion also in this country (Di Giulio and Rosina 2007; Salvini and De Rose 2011). Non-marital couples in Italy have gone from 1.6% of the couples in 1993-1994 to 3.8% in 2003 then to 5.9% in 2009 (Istat 2006, 2011). In addition to couples who are currently cohabiting, many married couples have cohabited before the marriage. Percentages of premarital cohabitations considerably increased in the last decades too: in 2003, only 1.4% of marriages celebrated in Italy before 1974 had been preceded by a premarital cohabitation; this percentage passed to 9.8% of marriages celebrated between 1984 and 1993, to 14.3% in 1994-1998, and reached 25.1% among marriages celebrated between 1999 and 2003 (Istat 2006).

Despite the increasing interest of researches on cohabitations in Italy (Rosina and Fraboni 2004; Bernardi and Nazio 2005; Gabrielli and Hoem 2010; Liefbroer and Dourleijn 2006; Mazzuco 2009), there are no studies on the extent to which marriages and cohabitations differ in the gender division of household labour in the Italian context.

The present study aims to fill this gap by studying the household labour allocation within married and cohabiting couples with an innovative approach. Most international literature on this topic has followed two different perspectives: some authors considered only currently married individuals and compared them on the basis of the experience of premarital cohabitation (see, for example, Batalova and Cohen 2002); other scholars focused, instead, on the direct comparison of currently married and currently cohabiting couples (Davis et al. 2007). Baxter (2005) combined the two approaches, comparing the gender division of household labour among currently cohabiting and currently married couples, but examining also the impact of a previous period of cohabitation for married individuals. Nevertheless, very few studies have considered the differences among cohabiters (Ciabattari 2004).

The present paper goes beyond most previous studies using the work by Baxter (2005) as a starting point, but analysing also whether household labour patterns are the same in different

¹ Henceforth, the term cohabitation is used to identify non-marital union. Similarly, cohabiting individuals (sometimes simply called cohabiters) are those living with a partner without being married.

cohabiting couples. In particular, both currently married and currently cohabiting individuals are distinguished according to whether they have experienced previous unions. The aim is to examine whether the cohabitation in itself and/or the experience of previous unions mean a more egalitarian division of household labour within the couple, considering whether differences across different couples persist once household and socio-demographic characteristics, and other controls are taken into account.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. Section 2 first gives a brief description of the theoretical approaches developed to explain the gender gap in household labour (2.1), and then discusses the allocation of household labour within different married and cohabiting couples in the light of explanations, hypotheses, and empirical results in the literature (2.2). Section 3 describes the data used (3.1), presenting also some descriptive analyses (3.2), and the variables that may help explain differences in household labour within couples (3.3). Section 4 presents the results. Section 5 contains some concluding remarks.

2. Background

2.1 Explaining the gender gap in household labour

Research has consistently shown the gender gap in household labour (Bianchi et al. 2000), and several theoretical approaches have been developed to explain the higher household labour contributions of women in comparison with men.

According to the *economic exchange model*, also referred to as the *relative resources perspective*, individuals perform household tasks in exchange for economic support (Brines 1994). Because of the traditional economic dependency of women upon their male partners, women are primarily responsible for household labour. The underlying assumption of this perspective is that household labour is considered negatively by both partners of a couple, and both negotiate to reduce their own load (Shelton and John 1996). In general, individuals who can negotiate a more favourable allocation of household labour for themselves are those with more resources in relation to their partners (Mannino and Deutsch 2007; Knudsen and Wærness 2008). Though most researches supported the importance of women's resources (for example, in terms of contribution to family income, and of education) for the domestic division of household labour, a number of studies debated this perspective (for a review, see Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010).

The *time-availability* perspective suggests that family members rationally allocate the household labour according to the availability of time in relation to the amount of household labour to be done (Hiller 1984). The idea is that family members divide household tasks according to the time they have available after paid work time is subtracted (Arrighi and Maume 2000). In general,

individuals spending more time at work, usually men, have less time to spend on household labour (Artis and Pavalko 2003). In fact, despite most literature supporting the time availability hypothesis (see studies cited by Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010), empirical evidence showed that even when women work as many hours as their male partners in paid employment, they assume the larger proportion of household tasks (Bartley et al. 2005).

Another theoretical perspective on the process of household labour allocation frequently used by literature is the *gender-ideology*². It posits an inverse relationship between traditional gender ideology and men's household labour contributions (Arrighi and Maume 2000; Davis et al. 2007). Traditional gender ideology favours, indeed, a strict male breadwinner/female homemaker structure; at the opposite, in egalitarian gender ideologies, both partners are considered equal and share the breadwinner/homemaker roles more equally. According to this approach, men and women spend different amounts of time in household labour depending on what they believe appropriate for men and women: women with more egalitarian attitudes perform less household labour than women with traditional gender ideology, whereas men with more egalitarian attitudes tend to spend more time on household labour than men with traditional attitudes. Researches have generally supported this hypothesis, though some authors suggested that gender ideology may be more important for women's household labour allocation than for men's (see the review by Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard 2010).

2.2 The allocation of household labour in cohabiting and married couples

Thus far, the literature has shown a more egalitarian division of household labour in cohabitations than in marriages, although cohabiting women still contribute more than their partners (Shelton and John 1993; South and Spitze 1994; Davis et al. 2007). Scholars have offered several explanations for the more equal allocation of household labour among cohabiting couples than among married ones.

First of all, it is possible that cohabiters and married individuals differ on certain key socio-demographic characteristics and attitudes relating to the theoretical approaches described above to explain the allocation of household labour. For example, cohabiting women have been found to have a greater participation in the labour market than married women³ (Shelton and John 1993) and,

² A development of the gender ideology perspective is *gender construction*, which is based on the idea that gender is created through everyday interaction for the allocation of household tasks (Berk 1985). For a review, see Lachance-Grzela and Bouchard (2010).

³ This is may be partly because cohabiters are less likely to have children than married couples, and partly for different attitude towards labour market among women who choose cohabitation rather than marriage (Henkens et al. 2002).

thus, according to the economic exchange model and to the time availability perspective (being less dependent on their partners and having less time available), could spend less time in household labour than married women. A similar observation is related to the attitudes of individuals who choose to cohabit. In particular, individuals with more traditional attitudes are more likely to marry, whereas those who are less likely to identify themselves with the traditional homemaking and breadwinning roles will choose cohabitation, rejecting marriage as an institution (Baxter 2001). Of course, cohabiters are not necessarily a homogeneous group: besides individuals who plan to cohabit permanently, cohabiting couples may include individuals who consider cohabitation as a forerunner to marriage. However, also in this case, cohabiting men and women are less likely to accept the homemaking and breadwinning roles.

Similarly, some of the differences in household labour allocation between married and cohabiting couples may be due to differences in household composition, which imply different and gender differentiated labour load. For example, married couples are more likely to have children than cohabiting couples, particularly in Italy (Kiernan 2004), and this is clearly associated with more household labour. Since mothers are responsible for the majority of childcare, even if fathers' participation is increasing in most European countries (see, for example, Smith 2004, and Smith Koslowski 2008), this may contribute to explaining the less egalitarian household labour division among married couples than among cohabiters.

Therefore, these remarks suggest that differences in the allocation of household labour between cohabiting and married couples may decrease after controlling for household and other key socio-demographic characteristics and individual attitudes. In fact, most recent literature has shown that differences in the domestic division of labour across couples persist once potential confounders were taken into account, supporting the hypothesis of cohabitation as a more egalitarian union in itself (Baxter 2005; Davis et al. 2007).

An explanation of this result is connected with the concept of *incomplete institutionalization* originally proposed by Cherlin (1978) for remarried families and step-families. The concept may be extended to the situation in cohabitating couples (see, for example, Brines and Joyner 1999; Baxter 2005) to stress the fact that cohabitations are not subject to all of the institutional rules of marriages; the incompleteness of these rules may leave space for cohabiters to negotiate more egalitarian division of labour than in the case of marriage (Baxter 2005). At the opposite, the institution of marriage leads to traditional gender patterns due to its norms in terms of appropriate behaviours for husbands and wives⁴. Following this hypothesis, due to the institutionalization of marriage, for

⁴ In fact, as suggested above, these different contexts of cohabitation and marriage may be connected with the different attitudes of individuals who choose to cohabit rather than to marry or vice versa.

cohabiting women a transition to marriage should increase their household labour and, conversely, for men a transition from cohabitation to marriage should mean a decrease in their household labour. In fact, couples who have cohabited before marriage are found to have more equal division of household labour than those who have not cohabited before marriage (see, for example, Batalova and Cohen 2002; Baxter 2005). This may be due to the fact that the patterns established during premarital cohabitation are carried over after marriage⁵ (Baxter 2005). In other words, former cohabiters bring their egalitarian experiences of cohabitation to their subsequent marriage. The underlying idea is the notion that couples compare their current situation (within marriage) to their previous one (in cohabitation) as a means of justifying more equal current arrangements.

The potential importance of the experience of premarital cohabitation in the formation of expectations and, thus, of household allocation in subsequent marriage is clear. This can be considered a particular case of the importance, in general, of previous unions for subsequent ones. Many scholars have referred to the impact of previous relationships on the division of household labour in later relationships (Sullivan 1997). The hypothesis is that individuals compare their current situation to that of a previous union (Thompson 1991) as a means of negotiating more equal arrangements. From the women's perspective, those who perceived that their previous relationships were characterized by an unfair share of household labour might be prone to seek a more equal division in the subsequent unions. From men's viewpoint, those who have experienced conflicts on the division of household labour in previous relationships might be more prepared to adapt to a more equal allocation in subsequent unions. This role of the experience of previous unions for the process of negotiation in a new partnership is found for all previous relationships, both marriages and cohabitations (Sullivan 1997).

This body of research suggests the following hypotheses:

HP 1: Due to the incomplete institutionalization of their union, currently cohabiting couples have a more equal division of household labour than married couples: this means that, net of controls, cohabiting women do less household labour than married ones, and cohabiting men spend more time in household labour than married ones.

HP 2: Both cohabiters and married individuals report a more egalitarian allocation of household labour if they have experienced previous relationships, since they use the comparison with previous unions to justify their current arrangements or, alternatively, to have more power of negotiation in the current union.

⁵ Or, again, to the different attitudes of individuals who choose cohabitation in a certain stage of their life course.

3. Data

3.1 Data-set and sample

The data come from the survey “Family and Social Subjects” (FSS) conducted in Italy by the Italian Statistical Institute (ISTAT) in 2003. The survey is based on a representative sample at national level of about 20,000 households collecting social and demographic information about each household member. In particular, detailed data on current and past marital and non-marital unions were available. In comparison with most previous studies (which used data gathered from only one partner in a couple so that each respondent - male or female - is reporting about his or her own information and that of his or her partner), in the FSS survey all members of the couples directly answer most of the questionnaire. In particular, all respondents (over the age of 18) were asked how many minutes and hours a week they spend, on average, on household labour⁶ (including housework, doing the shopping, and care of other components of the household).

The focus of the analyses is all currently married or currently cohabiting individuals aged 18-64⁷ (9,346 male respondents and 10,259 female respondents); both cohabiters and married individuals are distinguished according to whether they have experienced at least one previous (marital or non-marital) union.

As Table 1 shows, for currently married individuals, most previous unions are (premarital) cohabitations, and second or higher order marriages comprise about 20% (22% for men and 18% for women); instead, for currently cohabiting individuals, most previous relationships are marriages. Thus, currently married and currently cohabiting individuals with previous unions identify particular groups of men and women in different stages of their life course: most of the former are individuals who have cohabited, probably with their current spouse, before the marriage and may have viewed cohabitation as a forerunner to marriage⁸; most cohabiters had, instead, undergone the dissolution (for separation or death) of a previous marriage and are experiencing a further union with a new partner⁹.

⁶ Although the question does not allow to distinguish the different tasks, it gives information on the total time men and women spend on household labour, and so on the overall gender division of labour.

⁷ 89 men and 89 women (corresponding to 0.9% of the sample of currently married or currently cohabiting individuals) declared they have a chronic illness or a permanent disability that reduces continually their personal autonomy. Since they are less likely to do household labour independently of the type of couple, they are excluded from the analyses due to the difficulties associated with achieving statistically significant and meaningful results from analyses of such small groups.

⁸ Thus, they probably belong to younger birth cohorts than married individuals without previous unions (this and other characteristics will be examined in detail in the remainder of the paper).

⁹ As a consequence, as the following section will show, they are older than cohabiters in their first union.

Table 1. *Currently married and currently cohabiting men and women in the sample and type of the previous union.*

	Currently married individuals		Currently cohabiting individuals	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Without previous unions	8,158	9,047	224	240
With previous unions	794	805	170	167
% with a previous (premarital) cohabitation	(78.1) 86.6	(79.0) 82.7	(10.0) 29.9	(6.0) 18.6
% with a previous marriage	22.2	18.3	83.8	85.6

3.2 Descriptive analyses

Table 2 reports the weekly mean hours spent in household labour among men and women in different couples. The first point to note is that women report significantly more hours of work than men, regardless of the type of couple. For example, married women report spending about 36 hours per week on household labour, while married men report spending about 6 hours. In fact, as expected, the gender gap in household labour time is lower among currently cohabiting individuals than among married ones. This is mainly because cohabiting women report significantly fewer hours of labour than married ones; men's household labour time is, instead, quite similar across couples, with cohabiting men reporting only slightly (not significantly) more hours than married ones.

However, some differences in men's household labour time across couples emerge when distinguishing marriages and cohabitations according to the experience of previous unions (second part of Table 2). Both currently married and currently cohabiting men with previous relationships report significantly more household labour hours than men in their first unions. This higher participation in household labour among men with previous relationships does not correspond to the lower hours of household labour for women: both among currently married and currently cohabiting women, the differences between having experienced previous unions or not are not significant. In addition, the experience of previous relationships seems to lead to different results for married and cohabiting women. Corresponding to what was observed among men, married women with previous unions report doing fewer hours of household labour than married ones in their first union, suggesting a more equal allocation of household labour in the case of experience of previous unions; cohabiting women after previous unions report, instead, more hours of labour than those in a first cohabitation.

In summary, the gender gap is wider among married couples than among cohabitations, particularly when individuals are in their first unions; among cohabitations, having experienced previous relationships leads to a higher household labour both for men and for women.

Table 2. Weekly mean number of hours spent in household labour by currently married and currently cohabiting men and women, according to the experience of previous unions.

	Currently married individuals		Currently cohabiting individuals	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Total	6.03	36.13	6.39	26.30
Significance of a <i>t</i> test for difference between currently married and currently cohabiting individuals	Men: not significant		Women: $p < 0.01$	
Without previous unions	5.94	36.38	5.88	25.20
With previous unions	6.99	33.26	7.06	27.88
Significance of a <i>t</i> test for difference between individuals with and without previous unions	$p < 0.01$	not significant	$p < 0.01$	not significant

Clearly, these patterns may be the result of differences across the couples that, according to the three theoretical perspectives described in Section 2.1, may lead to differences in household labour allocation, rather than of the type of couple. Similarly, differences in household composition and in other characteristics may explain the different household labour allocation across couples. First, as Table 3 shows, cohabiters belong to younger cohorts than married individuals. Age also influences other characteristics - for example, the duration of the union¹⁰ and the presence and age of children: married individuals have longer duration of their relationship and are more likely to have more and older children in the household than cohabiting individuals do. Remarkable differences, partly connected with the cohort differences, between married and cohabiting individuals are observed also for participation in the labour market¹¹, particularly for women: cohabiters report higher participation than married ones. In addition, cohabitations are more common in the North of Italy.

In fact, as said above, currently married and currently cohabiting individuals identify particular groups in different stages of their life course according to whether they have experienced previous relationships. As a consequence, the different couples are expected to be characterized by different characteristics, some of which may be associated with household labour time. Currently married individuals with previous relationships, being especially premarital cohabitation (Table 1), belong to younger cohorts than those in their first unions (Table 4). Clearly, this means,

¹⁰ As defined in Section 3.3, the duration of the current union is expressed as the years elapsed since the partners start living in the same house (within a marriage or a cohabitation).

¹¹ Here and henceforth, the distinction between part-time and full-time work is based on the number of working hours declared by the respondent. In fact, the distinction could be made also on the basis of a spontaneous answer given by the respondent, who is asked whether his/her work is a part-time or a full-time work, but due to variations in working hours between branches of industry and sectors, the actual number of working hours is considered. In particular, part-time employment is defined as that which implies less than 30 hours of work a week, full-time employment as that with 30 hours or more a week.

for example, shorter duration of the relationship, fewer and younger children, higher participation in the labour market, and a higher educational level than that observed for those in their first unions.

Table 3. *Descriptive statistics for currently married and currently cohabiting men and women.*

	Currently married individuals		Currently cohabiting individuals	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Respondent's mean age	47.33	45.45	39.83	37.34
Mean duration of the union	20.04	21.65	6.38	6.59
Children				
No children	20.4	23.8	47.2	49.2
1 child <6	8.6	7.8	19.5	18.4
1 child 6+	22.8	23.4	15.5	15.2
2 or more children	48.2	45.0	17.8	17.2
Employment				
Not employed	19.5	53.8	7.6	32.9
Part-time employed	3.7	13.4	4.3	16.5
Full-time employed	76.8	32.8	88.1	50.6
Education				
High	8.9	8.9	8.4	11.5
Middle	34.2	33.9	38.1	39.1
Low	56.9	57.2	53.5	49.4
Residence				
North	41.4	41.2	65.2	65.1
Centre	17.6	18.1	17.0	18.2
South	41.0	40.7	17.8	16.7
N	8,952	9,852	394	407

Similarly, since most currently cohabiting individuals with previous relationships had experienced a previous marriage, they belong to an older cohort than that of cohabiters in their first union (Table 4). It is not surprising therefore that, although the duration of their relationship is similar to that of cohabiters in their first union, they have more and older children (probably born in the previous marriage), and a lower participation in the labour market.

Clearly, these and other differences suggested by Table 4 may contribute to different allocation of household labour across couples. Multivariate analyses can be applied to verify whether the effects of cohabitation and of the experience of previous relationships on the household labour patterns observed in Table 2 remain when individual and couple socio-demographic characteristics, and other potential confounding factors are held constant.

Table 4. *Descriptive statistics for currently married and currently cohabiting men and women, according to the experience of previous unions.*

	Currently married with previous unions		Currently married without previous unions		Currently cohabiting with previous unions		Currently cohabiting without previous unions	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Respondent's mean age	43.14	40.01	47.74	45.94	46.13	43.39	35.04	33.13
Mean duration of the union	13.11	13.78	20.71	22.35	7.03	7.25	5.88	6.13
Children								
No children	23.3	26.0	20.2	23.6	42.4	44.3	50.9	52.5
1 child <6	14.9	13.5	8.0	7.3	14.1	12.0	23.7	22.9
1 child 6+	17.6	18.0	23.3	23.9	18.8	21.0	12.9	11.3
2 or more children	44.2	42.5	48.5	45.2	24.7	22.7	12.5	13.3
Employment								
Not employed	11.5	44.5	20.3	54.7	10.6	37.7	5.4	29.6
Part-time employed	4.4	16.6	3.6	13.1	4.1	14.4	4.4	17.9
Full-time employed	84.1	38.9	76.1	32.2	85.3	47.9	90.2	52.5
Education								
High	14.0	12.9	8.5	8.5	8.2	9.0	8.5	13.3
Middle	36.0	40.0	34.0	33.4	40.6	34.1	36.1	42.5
Low	50.0	47.1	57.5	58.1	51.2	56.9	55.4	44.2
Residence								
North	55.3	58.0	40.0	39.7	60.6	64.1	68.7	65.8
Centre	15.0	14.3	17.9	18.4	18.2	19.1	16.1	17.5
South	29.7	27.7	42.1	41.9	21.2	16.8	15.2	16.7
N	794	805	8,158	9,047	170	167	224	240

3.3 Factors influencing time doing household labour

As suggested above, several factors may help explain the differences observed in household labour across couples and, thus, should be controlled for in the multivariate analyses. In particular, variables related to the three theoretical perspectives described in Section 2.1 as well as some other controls will be considered.

Educational level and employment status of both partners are taken into account to measure resources¹² (in the perspective of the *economic exchange model*). In particular, education is classified into three categories: low level includes individuals who have junior school education, middle level refers to those who have completed high school, and high level includes individuals with a university degree. Three categories of employment status are considered: not employed, employed part-time and employed full-time¹³. In fact, employment status is also an indicator of *time availability*, which, in addition, may be measured in terms of household composition. In particular, the presence of children in the household is considered as an indicator of the amount of time required for child care¹⁴. Since child care is particularly time demanding in case of younger children, the presence of a pre-school child is considered. In fact, a variable with four categories is used: no children, one child under 6, one child 6 or over, and two or more children (due to the low percentage of cohabiting individuals with two or more children, the presence of pre-school children in case of more than one child is not distinguished to avoid empty cells when the presence of children was crossed with the type of couple). Lastly, the *gender perspective* is taken into account with a measure of gender ideology constructed from two items in the FSS questionnaire. Respondents were asked their agreement on different statements: “Being a housewife is just as fulfilling as a working for pay”, and “When parents need care, female children should look after them more than male children”. Responses to these items ranged from “strongly agree” (1) to “strongly disagree” (5). The scores in the two items are summed and then divided by two, except in the cases where only one item was answered (0.3% of the total), for which the score in the unique item is considered (1.4% of observations were excluded in the analyses for having both items missing). In this way, a variable with a scale ranging from 1 to 5, with a higher score indicating a

¹² In fact, education may represent not only power dynamics but also gender ideology: more educated individuals tend to have more egalitarian attitudes than those with low educational level.

¹³ For the definition of part-time and full-time employment see footnote 11.

¹⁴ Preliminary analyses also considered the presence in the household of other adults who are not children. It may be an indicator of additional household labour (in the case of dependent elderly parents) or of help in the household labour (in the case of healthy adults). Probably, the two opposite effects compensate each other since this variable did not turn out to be significant in the multivariate models (meaning that other adults do not add or subtract significantly, on average, to or from the respondent's household time) and thus, it is not included in the final models reported in the following.

more egalitarian attitude, is obtained both for the respondent and for his/her partner. Clearly, whether the different couples affect gender role attitudes or whether gender role attitudes affect the choice of different forms of couples cannot be determined. However, in this way, the extent to which differences in gender ideology account for the differences on household labour allocation in different couples can be examined.

Finally, several socio-demographic and economic controls are taken into account. First of all, the age of respondent, the area of residence, and the duration of the current relationship are considered as being related to gender equity. Age tends to be negatively related to men's household labour, whereas the opposite is the case for women (Brines 1994); the respondent's¹⁵ age in years¹⁶, ranging from 18 to 64, is controlled for in the multivariate analyses. Because of a more traditional gender role-set still present in the South than in the North of Italy (Pinnelli and Fiori 2007; Tanturri and Mencarini 2009), the area of residence, defined using three categories (North, Centre, and South), is considered. Lastly, since couples who have been together for a long time are more likely to have a traditional division of household labour, the duration of the current union expressed as the years elapsed since the partners start living together (within a marriage or a cohabitation) is taken into account.

Due to the importance of the experience of previous relationships, another control is whether the respondent's partner had experienced previous unions (marriages or cohabitations).

As regards the economic context, household economic situation and house characteristics, such as the number of rooms and the home ownership, are considered, being connected with the total amount of household labour. Family economic status may reflect the use of labour-saving devices and the differences in the lifestyles¹⁷. It is determined through a subjective evaluation of the family's economic resources over the previous 12 months¹⁸: a dichotomous variable was built distinguishing whether the family had poor or insufficient resources. The number of rooms is an indirect measure of size of housing unit and it is measured by a variable with three categories (less than four rooms, four or five rooms, six rooms or more). Home ownership is controlled for in the

¹⁵ Only respondent's age is considered since respondent's and partner's age are usually highly correlated.

¹⁶ Preliminary analyses included also age squared as an independent variable, since many authors found that household labour is likely to peak during the middle adult years and to moderate at older ages (see, for example, South and Spitze 1994; Batalova and Cohen 2002; Davis et al. 2007). In fact, final models presented here do not include age squared since it did not turn out to be significant.

¹⁷ For example, higher-income households may hire domestic help or may eat outside home, and this may reduce household labour load.

¹⁸ In the survey a question asked whether, taking into account the needs of each member of the family, economic resources in the 12 months prior to the interview were very good, good, poor, or insufficient.

hypothesis that the amount of household labour may increase with the responsibilities and the increase in yard work, maintenance, and repair chores (as found, for example, by South and Spitze 1994) that go with home ownership. It is a dummy variable scored 1 for respondents who own their own home and 0 for those who do not.

Table A in the Appendix shows the percentage distribution of each variable for the sample of currently married and currently cohabiting men and women used in the following analyses (respondents with missing values in the gender ideology measure are excluded). Table B presents the same distributions distinguishing also the experience of previous unions.

4 Results

The multivariate analyses first examine, through OLS regression models estimated separately for men and for women¹⁹, whether the differences in household labour allocation across couples are statistically significant (completing results of Table 2). The second stage of the analyses examines the impact of the explanatory variables on household labour and, in particular, whether any observed differences by couples remain when key socio-demographic variables and other controls (described in Section 3.3) are held constant.

4.1 Main results

Models 1 in Table 5 regress weekly household labour hours on the key independent covariate representing the types of couple. Currently married men in their first union (reference category) report spending almost 6 hours per week on household labour, compared to over 36 hours for their female counterparts (see the constant terms of Models 1). More important, the differences in household labour hours across couples seem to be smaller among men than among women. As suggested by results of Table 2, both married and (to a lesser extent) cohabiting men with previous unions report doing significantly more household labour than those in their first unions (both marriages and cohabitations). Thus, for men, a higher participation in household labour is related to the experience of previous relationships, whereas cohabitation in itself does not mean a higher household labour contribution in comparison with marriage. The situation is completely different among women; for them, cohabitation implies a lower participation in household labour,

¹⁹ Separate models for men and for women were estimated (instead of a single model with all interactions between gender and the other explanatory variables) in order to have more readable results. This is also the approach followed by most previous studies (Shelton and John 1993; South and Spitze 1994; Davis et al. 2007), since gender has been found to be a major predictor of household labour hours (Bianchi et al. 2000; Davis and Greenstein 2004).

particularly when it is the first union (currently cohabiting women in their first unions spend over 11 hours less per week on household labour than married women without previous relationships). In the case of marriage, the experience of previous unions results in a lower participation in household labour. Thus, Models 1 suggest that cohabitation and the experience of previous unions have different effects on household labour time according to the gender.

Models 2 in Table 5 re-estimate couples differences in household labour hours for men and women, controlling for the other explanatory variables presented in Section 3.3.

After taking into account all socio-demographic and economic controls, and variables related to the three theoretical perspectives presented in Section 2.1, all the effects of the type of couple decrease, and some effects disappear. Thus, at least part of the effects of cohabitation and of the experience of previous unions on household labour allocation are accounted for by other variables.

In particular, for men the effect of the experience of previous unions disappears among cohabiters and decreases among married men. Instead, for women, differences across those in marital unions completely disappear, whereas the negative impact of cohabitation, particularly of first cohabitation, on the household labour time remains, even if its effect decreases. In fact, a large gap between married and cohabiting women remains even after differences in other characteristics have been taken into account: cohabiting women in their first unions spend an average of 4 hours per week fewer on household labour than married women do. Similarly, cohabiting women with previous unions spend 2 hours per week fewer than married women do. This lower household labour time of cohabiting women than married ones should be considered jointly with the fact that cohabiting men do not report significantly higher participation in household labour than their married counterparts do. This suggests that the total household labour load is different across couples (also considering other factors, such as the presence of children). In particular, the total household labour is lower in cohabitation than in marriages, but the fact that this is due only to a lower time spent in domestic tasks by women, but not by men, leads to conclude that, confirming HP 1, cohabitations have a more equal division of household labour than marriage.

In a similar perspective, HP 2 holds in the case of marriages. Although married women do not report significant differences in household labour time according to whether they are in the first union or not, the fact that married men with previous unions spend more time in household labour than married ones in their first union means a more egalitarian household labour allocation in marriages with previous unions. As suggested in Section 3.2, for most of these marriages, the previous unions are premarital cohabitations: thus, their more egalitarian arrangements confirmed results by literature (see, for example, Batalova and Cohen 2002). However, HP 2 is not confirmed among cohabitations: as observed above, the effect of the experience of previous unions is not

significant among cohabiting men, and other analyses (not presented here for space reasons) show that differences across cohabiting women according to the experience of previous unions are not significant, despite the fact that, as observed in Section 3.2, they represent individuals in different stages of their life course.

Table 3. *Factors influencing the hours of household labour: coefficients of regression models for men and women.*

	MEN		WOMEN	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Constant	6.01***	9.04***	36.62***	32.32***
Type of couple (ref: currently married without previous unions)				
Currently married with previous unions	1.09***	0.65**	-2.93***	-0.49
Currently cohabiting without previous unions	0.05	-0.57	-11.66***	-4.06***
Currently cohabiting with previous unions	1.22*	0.63	-8.82***	-2.64*
Respondent's education (ref: high)				
Middle		0.60*		2.37***
Low		0.27		3.35***
Partner's education (ref: high)				
Middle		-0.89**		1.45**
Low		-1.45***		1.85**
Respondent's employment (ref: not employed)				
Employed full-time		-5.15***		-17.47***
Employed part-time		-3.87***		-12.02***
Partner's employment (ref: not employed)				
Employed full-time		1.83***		1.05**
Employed part-time		1.44***		0.03
Children in the household (ref: no children)				
1 child < 6		1.85***		7.68***
1 child 6+		0.45*		4.52***
2 or more children		1.59***		8.84***
Respondent's gender equity		0.33**		0.35
Partner's gender equity		-0.01		-0.12
Respondent's age		-0.01		-0.03
Residence region (ref: South)				
North		0.86***		-1.96***
Centre		0.61**		-2.05***
Duration of the current union		-0.07***		0.05
Partner's experience of previous relationships (ref: no)				
Yes		-0.19		-0.62
Family economic resources (ref: sufficient)				
Poor or insufficient		0.49**		1.83***
Number of rooms of the house (ref: under 4)				
4 or 5		-0.42*		0.59
6 or more		-0.85***		1.29**
Home ownership (ref: No)				
Yes		0.46**		0.49

* = $p < .10$, ** = $p < .05$, *** = $p < .01$

4.2 The effects of other covariates

Part of the effects of cohabitation and of the experience of previous unions observed in Models 1 is attributable to the effects of other covariates. The occupational status of the respondent and the presence of children in the household are particularly important. In fact, some of the explanatory variables have highly significant effects on the time spent in household labour only for one sex (the generally stronger effects for women may be explained by the fact that women spend more time on household labour than men do).

Respondent's education has a strong effect only for women; in particular, a woman's education is inversely associated with her household labour (and it is positively connected with her partner's one). Instead, for men, their own education does not highly significantly affect time spent in household labour, even if the male partner's education is important for woman's household labour in the expected direction (women with more educated partners report spending fewer hours of household labour than those with less educated partners).

Being employed, particularly if in full-time work, significantly reduces household labour both for male and female respondents. Also partner's employment status is associated with respondent's household labour, though the effect is highly significant only for men: men whose female partners are employed (both full-time and part-time) report spending more time in household labour than men whose partners are not employed. These patterns may suggest that women have less discretionary time than men, so that time in work outside the home must necessarily divert time away from household labour.

As expected, the presence of children, particularly if they are of pre-school age or if there are more than one, means more household labour. In fact, for men, having only one child who is more than 6 years old does not imply significantly higher labour than that reported by childless men, whereas for women, as found in other studies (Shelton and John, 1993; South and Spitze, 1994), being more likely to be responsible for the child care, one child more than 6 years old also means a higher household labour.

As regards gender role attitudes, only men's gender equity is significantly associated with their household labour: men with more egalitarian beliefs tend to behave in a more egalitarian manner and report performing more household labour. It is likely that gender role attitudes are captured also by other covariates such as education and the area of residence. Couples living in the North or in the Centre of Italy have more egalitarian household allocation than those in the South, with men reporting more hours of household labour and women fewer.

Respondents' age and the partner's experience of previous unions are not significantly associated with household labour time either for men or for women. For men, longer unions are associated with lower participation.

Economic difficulties significantly increase the household labour, both for men and for women. This, as observed in Section 3.3, may reflect the use of labour-saving devices or differences in the lifestyles. Home ownership increases domestic work only weakly significantly, and only for men. Similarly, a bigger home (defined by having 6 or more rooms) implies a higher household labour for women though, surprisingly, the opposite is observed among men.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This article examines the differences between currently married and currently cohabiting couples in their household labour allocation, with reference to a country such as Italy, where cohabitation is only recently spreading. It is the first study on this topic in this country. In addition, in comparison with previous literature, the topic is addressed with an innovative approach, distinguishing the heterogeneous groups of cohabitations and marriages. In particular, whether individuals have experienced previous unions is considered. In this way, couples in different stages of their life course are identified and, not only the effects of cohabitation in itself, but also of the experience of previous unions, are studied.

Descriptive analyses show that, for a man, the experience of previous unions increases his participation in household labour within his current relationship (marriage or cohabitation), whereas the cohabitation in itself does not mean higher participation. Instead, cohabiting women report spending fewer hours of household labour than married ones do, particularly if they are in their first union. In the case of married women, the experience of previous unions means less household labour in the direction, as observed for men, of a more equal allocation of household labour.

In fact, multivariate results suggest that some differences across couples account for some of the observed differences in men's and women's household labour time. Nevertheless, even after controlling for socio-demographic and household characteristics, cohabiting women (both those in their first unions and those with previous unions) spend less time on household labour than married women do (independently of the experience of previous relationships). Among men, married ones with previous unions report spending more time in household labour than others do.

Combining the effects on men's and women's household labour time in relative terms, the hypothesis that, net of other controls, household labour is shared more equally among cohabiters than among married partners is confirmed. In other words, it appears that the institution of marriage exerts influence on individuals to behave in particular ways, independently of the social and

economic differences across type of couple that we know lead to women doing more household labour (e.g., having young children in the household, women spending less time in the labour market).

Having experienced previous unions before marriages (as Table 1 shows, these previous unions are predominantly premarital cohabitations) leads to a more equal allocation of household labour due a greater participation by men. Thus, confirming our hypothesis and most literature (Batalova and Cohen, 2002; Baxter, 2005), the patterns established in the previous unions (premarital cohabitation) are carried over into marriage. However, there is not a similar effect of previous relationships for cohabitations, which, as Table 1 shows, are predominantly cohabitations following a previous marriage. Thus, the greater power of negotiation conferred by the experience of previous unions for a more equal household labour allocation, as suggested by the literature (Sullivan 1997), is not confirmed. It is likely that these are very selected couples, particularly in a country such as Italy, where marital instability and unions following previous marriages are only recently spreading (Meggiolaro and Ongaro 2008). More research, with more recent data, is needed to address whether patterns found in other countries will be confirmed also in Italy with the diffusion of unions after previous marriages.

In addition, more research is needed to address whether the greater egalitarianism in cohabiting unions is the result of selection of more egalitarian individuals into cohabitation or of the experience of cohabitation itself (cohabitation as a causal mechanism). Longitudinal data on couples would provide additional and more powerful analytic tools with which to examine these issues.

The current study has the benefit of using very complete data. Estimates of time spent on household labour made by respondents (as recorded in the FSS survey) may be less accurate than estimates from time diaries; however, the fact that in the FSS survey the time spent on household labour is provided directly by both partners and detailed data on both on unions' biographies and on household' and respondents' characteristics are collected adequately compensates for the lack of time-diary data.

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APPENDIX

Table A. *Characteristics of currently married and currently cohabiting men and women (percentages) according to explanatory variables.*

	Currently married individuals		Currently cohabiting individuals	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
% with previous unions	8.9	8.2	43.5	41.3
Respondent's education				
High	9.0	9.0	8.4	11.1
Middle	34.3	34.0	38.5	39.8
Low	56.7	57.0	53.1	49.1
Partner's education				
High	9.4	8.8	11.3	8.1
Middle	36.2	32.3	40.3	38.5
Low	54.4	58.9	48.4	53.4
Respondent's employment				
Not employed	19.5	23.7	7.3	32.2
Employed part-time	3.7	13.5	4.2	16.4
Employed full-time	76.8	32.8	88.5	51.4
Partner's employment				
Not employed	50.7	25.6	32.5	10.1
Employed part-time	14.3	3.6	15.4	4.8
Employed full-time	35.0	70.8	52.1	85.1
Children in the household				
No children	20.3	23.7	47.6	49.4
1 child < 6	8.7	7.8	19.4	18.6
1 child 6+	22.8	23.4	15.5	15.1
2 or more children	48.2	45.1	17.5	16.9
Respondent's gender equity				
Mean	3.20	3.31	3.34	3.45
Partner's gender equity				
Mean	3.33	3.18	3.46	3.33
Respondents' age				
Mean	47.29	45.41	39.88	37.24
Residence region				
North	41.4	41.2	65.7	65.2
Centre	17.3	17.7	16.8	17.9
South	41.3	41.1	17.5	16.9
Duration of the current union	19.99	21.60	6.42	6.61
% with partner with previous unions	2.1	3.2	39.0	13.1
Family economic resources				
Sufficient	73.3	73.2	70.2	71.5
Poor or insufficient	26.7	26.8	29.8	18.5
Number of rooms				
Under 4	16.9	16.8	30.6	30.5
4 or 5	58.0	58.0	48.4	48.1
6 or more	25.1	25.2	21.0	21.4
% home-owner	74.3	75.5	53.9	54.7
N	8,762	9,633	382	397

Table B. Characteristics of currently married and currently cohabiting men and women (percentages) according to explanatory variables and the experience of previous unions.

	Currently married with previous unions		Currently married without previous unions		Currently cohabiting with previous unions		Currently cohabiting without previous unions	
	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women	Men	Women
Respondent's education								
High	13.9	13.1	8.5	8.6	7.8	9.1	8.8	12.5
Middle	36.2	39.8	34.1	33.5	40.4	34.8	37.0	43.3
Low	49.9	47.1	57.4	57.9	51.8	56.1	54.2	44.2
Partner's education								
High	13.1	13.5	9.1	8.3	11.5	9.8	11.1	6.9
Middle	41.5	35.4	35.6	32.1	36.1	34.1	43.5	41.6
Low	45.4	51.1	55.3	59.6	52.4	56.1	45.4	51.5
Respondent's employment								
Not employed	11.2	44.5	20.3	54.5	10.8	36.6	4.6	29.2
Employed part-time	4.5	16.7	3.6	13.2	3.6	14.6	4.6	17.6
Employed full-time	84.3	38.8	76.1	32.3	85.5	48.8	90.8	53.2
Partner's employment								
Not employed	43.7	13.5	51.4	26.7	34.3	18.3	31.0	4.3
Employed part-time	16.7	4.7	14.1	3.5	15.7	4.9	15.3	4.7
Employed full-time	39.6	81.8	34.5	69.8	50.0	76.8	53.7	91.0
Children in the household								
No children	23.2	25.7	20.0	23.5	42.8	43.9	51.4	53.2
1 child < 6	14.8	13.6	8.1	7.4	14.4	12.2	23.2	23.2
1 child 6+	17.8	18.1	23.3	23.8	18.7	21.3	12.9	10.7
2 or more children	44.2	42.6	48.6	45.3	24.1	22.6	12.5	12.9
Respondent's gender equity								
Mean	3.29	3.42	3.19	3.30	3.35	3.44	3.33	3.46
Partner's gender equity								
Mean	3.45	3.28	3.32	3.17	3.47	3.29	3.45	3.37
Respondent's age								
Mean	43.12	39.97	47.69	45.89	46.14	43.25	35.06	33.02

(to be continued)

Residence region								
North	55.0	57.6	40.1	39.7	60.2	65.2	69.9	65.2
Centre	15.0	14.4	17.6	18.1	18.1	17.7	15.7	18.0
South	30.0	28.0	42.3	42.2	21.7	17.1	14.4	16.7
Duration of the current union	13.09	13.75	20.66	22.29	7.01	7.24	5.97	6.17
% with partner with previous unions	10.4	22.0	1.3	1.6	53.0	14.0	28.2	12.5
Family economic resources								
Sufficient	70.2	69.6	73.6	73.6	70.5	75.0	69.9	69.1
Poor or insufficient	29.8	30.4	26.4	26.4	29.5	25.0	30.1	30.9
Number of rooms								
Under 4	23.1	23.2	16.3	16.3	22.9	25.0	36.6	34.3
4 or 5	54.9	54.8	58.3	58.3	51.8	48.2	45.8	48.1
6 or more	22.0	22.0	25.4	25.4	25.3	26.8	17.6	17.6
% home-owner	63.4	64.5	75.4	76.5	55.4	58.5	52.8	51.9
N	776	786	7,986	8,847	166	164	216	233