

# Caregiving Dads, Breadwinning Mums:

Transforming Gender in Work and Childcare?

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## Executive Summary

Although men's and women's involvement in paid work and childcare has become increasingly similar over the past decades, the work and care arrangements of most British couples persistently reflect traditional gendered norms, with mothers as primary caregivers and fathers as main breadwinners. This gender inequality in the home both disadvantages women in the workplace and denies men the opportunity to develop close nurturing relationships with their children.

To identify routes and barriers to greater gender equality, this research examined parenting arrangements in which childcare responsibilities are shared equally or assumed primarily by the father. This is the first study to use a mixed-methods approach to examine couples' work and care arrangements from the perspectives of both mothers and fathers, uniquely comparing equal sharers, role-reversed and traditional couples in a single comprehensive design.

The quantitative phase drew on extensive survey data from a nationally representative sample of parents with children aged 11 or younger. The qualitative phase comprised 60 in-depth semi-structured interviews with 30 couples (where each partner was interviewed separately).

Three key questions were addressed:




(i) what do the parenting practices of equal sharers and role-reversed couples entail in terms of time distribution and task allocation? (ii) what are the facilitating economic, structural, and psychological factors that enable role-reversed couples and equal sharers to resist gendered parenting norms? and (iii) what are the consequences of their division of roles for wellbeing and relationship satisfaction?

Our findings show that both fathers and mothers in all parenting arrangements want to spend time with their children and be closely involved in their lives. However, most couples feel forced to identify a main carer with reduced involvement in paid work, and a main breadwinner with reduced involvement in childcare.




Opportunities for organising family life in ways that enable both parents to be equally involved in work and care are constrained by gendered parenting leave entitlements, long work hours cultures, limited options for flexible and part-time work, and expensive inaccessible childcare. Couples who overcome these obstacles are characterised by a strong commitment to gender equality, mothers' strong work identities and earnings, and fathers' desire to be heavily involved in raising their children.

## Key findings





### Traditional arrangements

-  In the majority of families, the mothers are the main carers and arrange their paid work to accommodate childcare, including long Maternity Leave, part-time work or flexible hours. The fathers carry the main responsibility for breadwinning and work full-time, long and often inflexible hours. These fathers share childcare in the evenings and weekends only.
-  25% of the fathers in traditional arrangements felt they were forced into their role and saw no other viable options. Only 30% felt they chose this division of responsibilities (compared to 46% of the fathers who were primary caregivers).
-  Mothers in traditional arrangements reported significantly lower wellbeing and relationship quality than mothers who shared childcare equally or reversed roles.

### Reversing roles

-  Couples' decision to reverse roles was typically motivated by the mothers' greater attachment to work and higher earnings, combined with a desire to avoid or limit the use of formal childcare provision, and the fathers' desire to spend more time with their children.
-  These couples' day-to-day division of work and childcare generally mirrored that of the traditional couples, with the fathers being the main carers and arranging their paid work to accommodate childcare, and the mothers working full-time.
-  Compared to traditional couples, role-reversers tended to have a slightly more equal division of childcare, with greater involvement by the breadwinning mothers compared to the breadwinning fathers.

### Equal sharing

-  The decision to share work and childcare equally was motivated by egalitarian gender ideologies and an expectation of a 50/50 split of family responsibilities, as well as fathers' desire to spend more time with children and the importance attributed to mothers' paid work.
-  Equal sharers described conscious efforts to achieve equality, having to "fight for" their chosen arrangement by overcoming barriers which facilitate a female carer/male breadwinner division.
-  Both fathers and mothers who were equal sharers worked shorter hours than main breadwinners and spent more time with their children as sole caregivers.
-  Equal sharing mothers had the highest levels of satisfaction with their division of responsibilities, with 83% reporting they were satisfied or very satisfied (compared to 60% of mothers in traditional arrangements and 52% of mothers who reversed roles). Equal sharers tended more than other parents to perceive their arrangement as resulting from their conscious choice and were the least likely to want it to change.

## Recommendations

### **Equal parenting leave entitlement, including non-transferable ‘use-it-or-lose-it’ Parental Leave for fathers**

Gendered policies around leave for parenting do not align with couples’ commitment to equality, fathers’ desire to be closely involved in their children’s lives, and mothers’ strong attachment to work. Fathers who otherwise shared childcare equally or were the main caregivers were entitled to two weeks of Paternity Leave only, while their partners were paid to stay at home for the first 39 weeks of the child’s life. Shared Parental Leave was rarely utilised, either because couples were not entitled, could not afford the reduction in the father’s income, or the mothers did not want to lose their time with their child by reducing their Maternity Leave. These gendered leave policies therefore restrict couples’ choices and steer them into a traditional division of family roles despite their beliefs, preferences and parenting arrangements.

### **Government policies supporting shorter and more flexible work hours for both fathers and mothers**

Flexibility in working hours, working from home, part-time working and emphasis on product/output-based (rather than time-based) work were all identified by parents as beneficial to managing childcare. Both women and men, however, reported that in practice there are barriers to securing such work arrangements, especially for more desirable or senior roles, with some suggesting that this was particularly a problem for men. In addition, parents whose partner’s work commitments were less flexible than their own felt forced to arrange their work around their partner’s job to facilitate childcare. This meant indirectly prioritising the career of the less flexible partner, most often the father. In this way, flexible and part-time working only for mothers can exacerbate inequalities in arrangements, as well as potentially impacting negatively on their career prospects. Parents would like to see the normalisation of part-time and flexible working for both fathers and mothers, and regardless of seniority.

### **Clearer, more visible workplace policies and underpinning family-friendly cultures**

Our findings suggest that parents’ experiences of workplaces are often dependent on individualised factors such as supportive or unsupportive managers, and employees are sometimes made responsible for being aware of policies and asserting their entitlement. Employers can help to provide more consistently positive experiences for workers who are carers by improving clarity, knowledge and visibility around existing state and workplace specific policies and by encouraging family-friendly workplace cultures.

### **High quality affordable childcare provision to enable both parents to return to work after parenting leave**

In addition to the lack of shorter hours and flexible work arrangements, the pressure on parents to identify a main caregiver and a main breadwinner is exacerbated by the lack of childcare alternatives. This is particularly difficult in early years as unaffordable formal childcare often means that one parent must stay at home until the child turns 3 years old and qualifies for (limited) free provision. Our findings suggest that parents also find it difficult to juggle work commitments with childcare after school/nursery and during school holidays. To enable both parents to maintain their involvement in paid work, affordable, formal and high-quality childcare provision should be made available from the age of 6 months.

Overall, the findings point to a discrepancy between current state and workplace policies and parents’ actual views and preferences. Gender norms and parents’ priorities are slowly changing, whereas outdated gendered policies continue to reinforce traditional norms and encourage mothers to stay at home or work part-time and fathers to work full time. These policies are incompatible with fathers’ desire to spend more time with their children and work shorter and more flexible hours. They are also incompatible with mothers’ strong work identities and desire to share family work with their partners. This research focuses on couples who managed to overcome the barriers posed by gendered policies and achieve greater equality in their family. Through their actions, they contribute to a gradual pressure that can potentially lead to the policy changes indicated in this report.



# Why Transforming Gender in Work and Childcare?

Over the past few decades, men's and women's patterns of work and childcare have become increasingly similar, with the gender gap in family responsibilities gradually narrowing (Pailhé et al., 2021; Sullivan et al., 2018). This gender convergence reflects women's increased time in paid work as well as men's increased time with children (Altintas & Sullivan, 2017; Burgess & Davies, 2017). Nevertheless, family responsibilities are still predominantly distributed along gendered lines (Sullivan et al., 2018). In the UK, men's work hours are among the longest in Europe (Eurostat, 2022), mothers' rates of full-time employment are among the lowest (Costa Dias et al., 2020), and fathers' hours of care for young children are less than half those of mothers (Walthery & Chung, 2021).

The gendered division of family work is closely linked with gender inequality in the workplace (Andrew et al., 2021). Existing evidence suggests that women continue to carry the main responsibility for childcare and compromise their work lives by prioritising their family; often taking long leaves for childcare, working part-time and/or seeking flexibility (Chung & Van der Lippe, 2020). This comes at the expense of career advancement and opportunities for achievement and recognition. Conversely, as men carry the main responsibility for breadwinning, they tend to compromise their family lives by putting paid work first: they work full-time, longer hours, and do not take long leaves for childcare (Kaufman & Grönlund, 2021). This comes at the expense of their family time and the opportunity to develop close intimate connections with their children as main caregivers.

This persistent gendered division of responsibilities therefore restricts and disadvantages both men and women, preventing them from choosing a balance that is best for them and their families regardless of their gender. Furthermore, while the gendered division of family roles persists, gender inequality in the workplace and the gender wage gap cannot be addressed (Joshi et al., 2021; Norman, 2020).

The pressing question is therefore what can be done to facilitate change towards greater equality. To explore the routes and barriers to a less gendered division of work and childcare, we uniquely examined parenting arrangements in which childcare responsibilities are shared equally or assumed primarily by the father, alongside couples with traditional arrangements. Although still statistically rare, different-gender couples who share equally or reverse roles resist conventional images of motherhood and fatherhood and constitute a steadily growing phenomenon of utmost theoretical and practical importance (Chesley & Flood, 2017; Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020). Societal change is caused not only by the effects of macro-level norms and policies on individuals, but also by pressures exerted by the actions of individuals on public discourse and policy (Sullivan et al., 2018). Couples who defy prevailing societal expectations contribute gradual pressure that has potential to lead to policy change, which, in turn, influences the actions of others.

To shed light on the unique strategies of couples who share equally or reverse roles, and the impact of these arrangements on parents' wellbeing and relationship satisfaction, we compared them to more traditional couples who maintain the normative male breadwinner/female caregiver arrangement. Our research addressed three sets of related questions:

## Research questions

### (i) PRACTICES:

#### **What do the parenting practices of equal sharers and role-reversed couples entail in terms of time distribution and task allocation?**

Do role-reversed arrangements mirror those of traditional couples? Can traces of traditional gender segregation be found in their allocation of tasks, and what do they teach us about the most persistent and change-proof elements of gendered parenting? How do equal sharers organise work and childcare and what trade-offs do they face?

### (ii) PATHWAYS:

#### **What are the facilitating economic, structural and psychological factors that enable role-reversed couples and equal sharers to resist gendered parenting norms?**

What is the role played by state and workplace policies? Who takes leave after the birth of a child, for how long and why? Do caregiving fathers and equal sharers use workplace schemes similarly to their female counterparts? Are their parenting arrangements enabled by underlying ideologies?

### (iii) CONSEQUENCES:

#### **What are the psychological effects of equal sharing and role-reversing?**

How do parenting arrangements affect parents' satisfaction with the division of roles, their perceived choice and desire for change? More broadly, how are parents' relationship quality, life satisfaction and self-esteem affected by their division of roles?

To answer these questions, we combined quantitative and qualitative research methods. Appendix 1 provides a detailed description of the sample and data. In brief, comprehensive quantitative data were collected from a nationally representative sample of 5,605 parents in February 2020. Qualitative data were generated through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with 30 couples, conducted separately with each partner between November 2020 and July 2021 (please see Appendix 1 for a discussion of the effect of COVID-19 on the collection of data).

The study focused on married or cohabiting different-gender couples with at least one child aged 11 or younger. Although limiting the child's age restricted the sample to somewhat younger couples, this captures the life stage when childcare needs are most demanding and work-family conflict is highest. We compared three groups of parents: traditional couples, where the mother is the primary caregiver and the father is the primary breadwinner; equal sharers where mothers and fathers are both equally responsible for caregiving and breadwinning; and role-reversed couples, where the father is the primary caregiver and the mother is the primary breadwinner.

## Definitions of equal sharing, role-reversing and traditional arrangements

The criteria for inclusion in each of the three groups were based on a combination of time distribution and task allocation measures. These included the participants' and their partners' weekly work hours, hours spent as sole caregivers, the division of childcare tasks, and the proportion of family income contributed by each partner. In each of these measures, we examined the gaps between the partners in order to identify participants who are primary caregivers, primary breadwinners, or sharing caregiving and breadwinning equally with their partners.

The respondents' family role and gender were then used to classify them into one of the three categories as follows:

### **Traditional:**

The mother is the primary caregiver and the father is the primary breadwinner; that is, the mother works at least 7 hours less than the father, provides at least 7 hours more of childcare, performs more childcare tasks than the father and contributes up to 40% of the family income. The term 'traditional' therefore refers to an arrangement in which the main responsibilities follow traditional gender norms, rather than to stay-at-home mothers and sole breadwinner fathers.

### **Role-reversed:**

The definition of role-reversed arrangements mirrored that of the traditional; that is, the father works at least 7 hours per week less than the mother, provides at least 7 hours more of childcare, carries out at least half of the childcare tasks and contributes up to 40% of the family income.

### **Equal sharers:**

The mother and father are both equally responsible for caregiving and breadwinning, with a roughly equal distribution of time and tasks; that is, up to 5 hours difference between partners in their work and childcare hours, carrying out approximately half of the childcare tasks and contributing approximately half of the family income (for further details see Appendix 1).

The focus on these three groups served to address the three research questions. As not all couples fit into one of these three groups, this classification is not exhaustive of the initial full sample and the final sample included 1,380 men and 1,433 women. However, the full sample from which we drew the three groups was nationally representative and therefore any variations between the groups represent the characteristics of the groups. The three groups did not differ in terms of the parents'

education level, ethnicity or the region where they lived. Parents in traditional arrangements were younger on average and had more children (see Appendix 1 for details). In addition, the youngest child of equal sharers tended to be older (5 years old on average) than those of traditional (4.2 years old) and role-reversed couples (3.7 years old). This difference suggests that sharing equally is facilitated by formal childcare provision which becomes more easily available when the child starts primary school.



# 1. How Couples Organise Work and Childcare

To explore how traditional couples, equal sharers and couples who reverse roles divide housework and childcare, the survey respondents were asked to indicate who does each task on a list of 24 housework and childcare tasks. Responses were given on a scale from 1 (almost always my partner) to 5 (almost always myself). The list of tasks included four empirically distinct dimensions. In addition to housework chores, there were three domains of childcare tasks: physical care for the child's daily needs, such as feeding, dressing, and bathing; socio-emotional care to the child, such as playing, helping with social or emotional problems, and taking on outings or social activities; and higher-order responsibility for the child, such as planning activities or scheduling social meetings, preparing the child's bag before going out, and making arrangements for childcare. Participants in the in-depth interviews were also asked to describe how they organised work and childcare, including housework and the three domains of childcare tasks, as well as describing their daily routine.

Sharing tasks equally overall, or having two distinct caregiving/breadwinning roles, were the criteria for inclusion in the three study groups, and the analysis focused on more nuanced variations across different types of housework and childcare tasks. It was designed to reveal whether role-reversed arrangements mirror those of traditional couples, what are the most persistent aspects of gendered parenting, and how equal sharers arrange time in work and childcare.

## The division of tasks among equal sharers, role-reversed and traditional couples

Exploring what role-reversed arrangements look like and identifying traces of traditional gender segregation in their allocation of tasks, teaches us about the most persistent and change-proof elements of the gendered division of family work. To this aim, we compared the division of specific housework and childcare tasks across the three study groups.

Overall, our findings suggest that role-reversed couples tended to share housework and childcare slightly more equally than traditional couples. While mothers in traditional arrangements performed almost all the tasks by themselves, fathers who were the main caregivers had more involved partners.

**Housework.** Looking more specifically at the five housework tasks, the survey data showed that cooking was the least gendered

task, which fathers who reversed roles performed as much as mothers in traditional arrangements. Laundry was the most gendered housework task, which mothers in traditional arrangements carried out almost completely on their own while couples in role-reversed arrangements tended to share equally.

Participants in the in-depth interviews suggested that the primary caregiver did more housework regardless of gender, primarily because they spent more time at home. Similarly, in equal sharing couples, at times where one parent was at home more than the other (for example, during Maternity Leave or temporary unemployment), they did more of the everyday household duties. More generally, among equal sharers, chores were carried out by whoever noticed them or according to specific preferences, as Lisa explained:

“ We kind of, it's not like something we've ever agreed to. It just kind of falls into that way because of what we prefer to do. So like I hate ironing, I would rather do anything other than ironing but Adam<sup>1</sup> loves it [laughs]. So he'll do like the whole week's ironing and I'll have done the washing and hanging up and putting away which takes about the same time. So we do that, tend to do that on Sundays. And in terms of house cleaning I'll do the top, the first floor and he'll do the bottom floor because he likes cleaning the kitchen and I hate it.

Lisa, Equal sharing mother

**Physical care.** The survey data presented in Figure 1 suggest that overall, the allocation of daily physical care tasks in role-reversed couples mirrored that of traditional couples. The data further suggest that daily physical care for babies and young children was split into two types of tasks, reflecting the absence of the breadwinning partner during typical work hours. Tasks such as feeding, changing, dressing and supervising morning routine were performed almost exclusively by the main caregiver, whether this was the father or the mother. In contrast, tasks such as putting children to bed and getting up at night tended to be shared more equally in each of the parenting arrangements. This is likely to reflect the availability of the breadwinning partner in the evenings and nights, so that tasks that are typically done during that time provide more opportunities for the breadwinning parent to get involved.

## Who provides daily physical care?

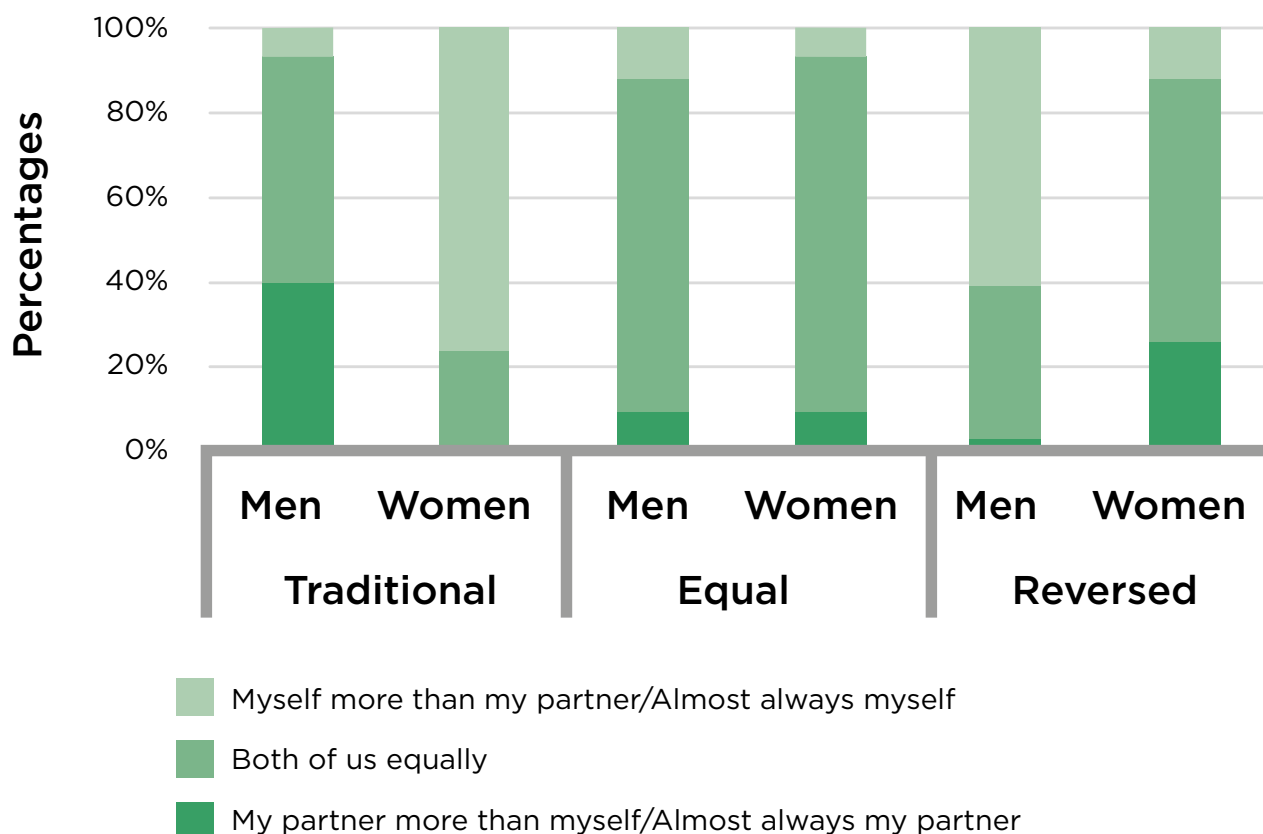


Figure 1: Percentages of who-does-what averaged across 7 childcare tasks (feeding, changing, dressing, supervising morning routine, bathing, putting to bed, getting up at night) on a scale from 1 (almost always my partner) to 5 (almost always myself).

These patterns of sharing according to parental presence and availability were also evident in the in-depth interviews. Mothers and fathers who were the main breadwinners were sometimes available to help with the morning routine and dropping children off at nursery/school, and typically shared the physical care in the evenings (dinner, bath and bedtime routine). In contrast, equal sharers often swapped throughout the day, and many described a completely fluid division in which both parents do all types of childcare tasks. Matthew explained that it ‘would depend who was there, who was looking after [daughter]’. Another father, Luke, described a less common division in which he and his partner systematically split every childcare task equally between them:

“ We did, we were dead equal with feeding, we were dead equal with changing nappies, bedtime regimes, everything like that. Almost literally in some cases. Our two children were terrible sleepers for about two years each and at one point we literally split the night into two parts. So one of us would sleep for the first four hours and then get up for the second, or however long it would be that night, and then vice versa on other nights. So in that respect, **we were bang on 50/50 responsible for nappy changing, sleep regimes and feeding.**

**Luke, Equal sharing father, our emphasis**

Breastfeeding was cited as a reason for mothers taking on more childcare responsibilities during the early years of caring for babies. Among equal sharing and primary caregiving fathers, breastfeeding was sometimes considered a barrier to being able to look after their babies during the mothers' Maternity Leave. Despite that, these fathers described efforts to share childcare from the start. For example, Jim, an equal sharer, recalled how 'I did my best to try and pay attention to do as much of it as I could [...] and to pick it up so that in the three months that I was off, she could just focus on work again.' Will, a main caregiver, used to get up at night to change nappies and bring the baby to his partner for nursing:

“...therefore I was kind of doing that initial comfort, changing the nappy and then I handed over to Lucy and she did the breastfeeding. And at that point I had a little bit of a powernap while he, while he did that. And then I picked him up from her and took him back to the cot and tried to settle him down. And that way it was, although obviously Lucy was awake during the breastfeeding, it meant that she didn't have to get out of bed and therefore could settle quite quickly once she'd done the breastfeeding.

**Will, Role-reversed father**

Moreover, equal sharing and role-reversed couples viewed the initial unequal division of feeding as fully reversible and fathers started sharing the feeding once bottle-feeding or solid food were introduced. Beth, an equal sharing mother, noted that their daughter 'started having solids earlier than recommended [laughs], then Matthew took control of quite a lot of that.' Therefore, mothers' breastfeeding did not seem to prevent fathers taking a more active role in childcare in the longer term.

Some couples felt that switching to feeding their baby formula/expressed breastmilk with bottles helped the father get more involved. These fathers were then able to feed the baby at night-time, for example, during their Paternity Leave:

“ [...] the nice thing about it, that actually, it was kind of a very nice thing for me, was that because we were bottle feeding him, even though it was with breast milk, we were bottle feeding him from day one, and it meant that I could feed him. So I would do as many feeds as I could. I could do the night feeds.

**Nicholas, Traditional father**

However, switching to formula/expressed milk bottle feeding did not necessarily lead to more equal sharing of feeding in traditional couples in the long term, as the breadwinning fathers returned to work quickly, meaning the mothers were primarily responsible for feeding. Some couples who needed to bottle-feed their baby appreciated its positive effect on their ability to share childcare equally:

“ So with our first child, [...] she didn't latch to the breast, so we were unfortunate in that we wanted to breastfeed. Obviously, that's the sort of gold standard really as far as the medical professionals are concerned, but we were very lucky we felt in the end, in retrospect, because we were bottle feeding, which meant that I could take as much responsibility as Lily did, my partner did, for the feeding regime.

**Luke, Equal sharing father**

**Socio-emotional care.** The survey data suggested that attending to children's social and emotional needs was the least gendered domain of childcare. Playing with, reading to and disciplining children were tasks in which male caregivers' share was akin to female caregivers' share. However, helping children with emotional and social problems seemed more gendered; mothers in traditional arrangements performed this task mostly by themselves, while fathers who were the main caregivers shared this task equally with their breadwinning wives.

In the in-depth interviews, most parents indicated that comfort was provided based on availability and proximity to the child. This meant that primary caregivers, whether fathers or mothers, did more comforting overall because they were more present. However, children sometimes continued to seek comfort from the main caregiver even when both parents were present, as Lucy explained:

“ [Son] definitely seeks more emotional comfort from Will, or has done since I returned to work, and I think, I assume that’s because Will’s been more present [...] so he’s the reliable person that’s always been there.

**Lucy, Role-reversed mother**

Like emotional comfort, disciplining in equal sharing couples was done by whoever was close or noticed the incident, and more often by the primary caregiver in traditional and role-reversed couples because the main carer physically spent more time with child.

**Responsibility.** When looking at summary results from the different domains, responsibility for childcare stood out as the most gendered and change-resistant domain. The responsibility dimension included management tasks such as planning, scheduling, making arrangements and maintaining contact with day-care/school teams. In the survey data, all seven tasks within this domain were characterised by a large gap between female caregivers and their partners, compared to a smaller or non-existent gap between male caregivers and their wives. Echoing findings from qualitative studies on primary caregiving fathers (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2020), the results in Figure 2 show that while women in traditional arrangements carried out almost all these tasks by themselves, many role-reversed couples shared these tasks equally, so that the breadwinning mother assumed equal responsibility. In couples who were otherwise equal sharers, this is where equality was least likely, and a third of the female equal sharers reported assuming more responsibility than their partners (cf. Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020).

This pattern was reflected in the in-depth interviews and contributed to the mental workload of managing families that was predominantly felt by mothers who were considered and in one case described explicitly as ‘project managers’. Mothers were more likely to deal with nursery and school administration, clothes and equipment exchanges, arrange medical appointments and plan family activities, playdates and so on. Among equal sharers, mothers were often responsible for keeping track of what needs to be done by both parents:

“ I guess, yeah the, I think the way we kinda like to think of it is Claire is the brains of the operation and I’m the brawn! So I do the, the doing stuff. She thinks about what needs doing and then I, I do it... So, for example, with things that need to get done at the weekend well we’ll make, she’ll make the list of what we need to do and then I’ll go and do the various bits, different bits and pieces like hoovering and cleaning up the bathroom and that kinda thing.

**Jeremy, Equal sharing father**

Among traditional couples, mothers’ sole responsibility for planning and management was even more prominent:

“ 100% me. Everything you’ve just said, I even, I book my husband’s haircuts. I literally, I run the show. [...] I don’t think, I don’t wanna put Peter down, but I don’t think he does any of that. That’s just my, I think that’s just, I like to do it though, I like to keep everything in check, I wouldn’t wanna rely on Peter to do that.

**Amy, Traditional mother**



## Who does the management of childcare?

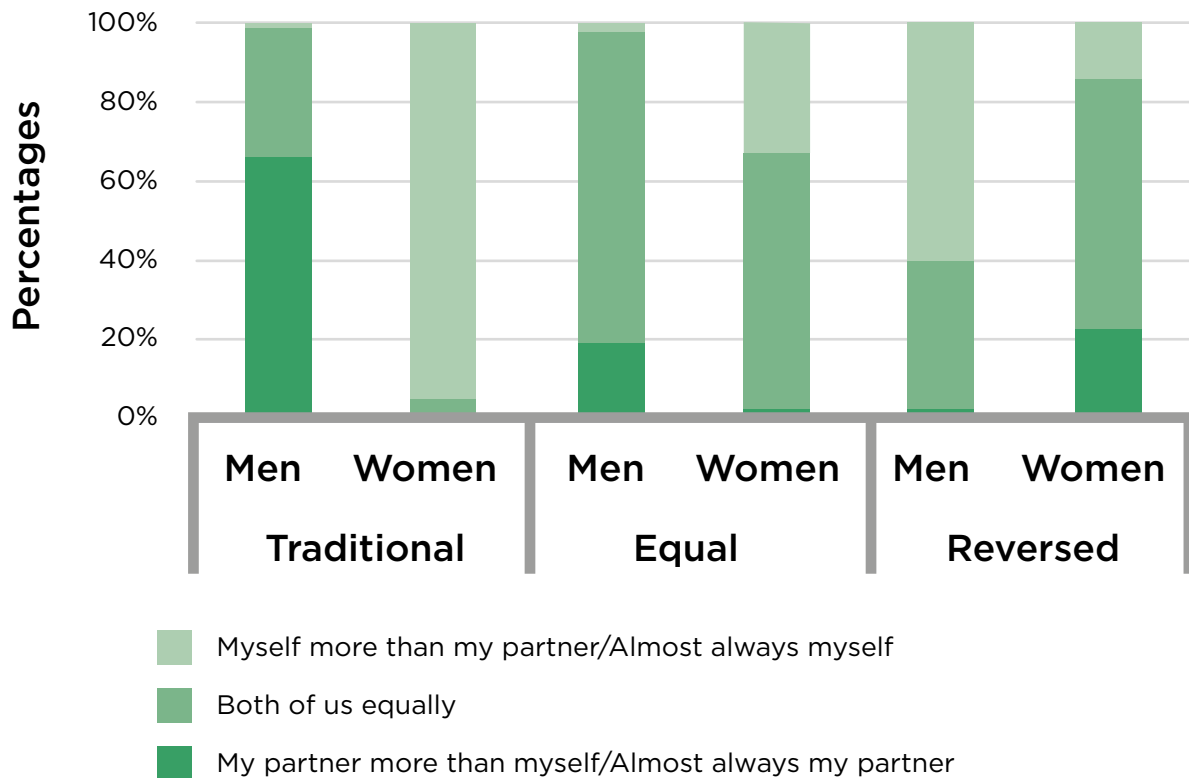


Figure 2: Percentages of who-does-what averaged across 7 childcare tasks (planning activities/scheduling meetings, choosing day-care/school, making arrangement for childcare, preparing the child's bag before going out, contact with school/day-care team, taking to doctor/dentist, providing sick care) on a scale from 1 (almost always my partner) to 5 (almost always myself).

Although responsibility for management and planning appeared as the most gendered domain of childcare in both the survey and interview data, it is important to note that most of the role-reversed respondents reported in the survey that the responsibility was either assumed by the primary caregiving father or shared equally. This was less evident among the participants in the interviews, although some equal sharers and role-reversed couples provided descriptions consistent with the survey data. For example, Beth explained that these responsibilities were split by areas:

“ I think that it depends on what it is. So anything related to school like days where they have to dress up or when she needs to remember to take some money in for some event, that's pretty much all me. Whereas if it's things like medical appointments, like if she needed to see the dentist or go for her eyes checked or something like that, that's more likely to be Matthew.

**Beth, Equal sharing mother**

Jennifer, a main breadwinner, described her partner as the person responsible for management and planning:

“ Yeah, that has mostly been Brian [...] he was the first port of call from the school. [...] so he's the one that gets all the emails and he brings them home from school and checks the notes that are in the bag and knows what days they need to go on the trips, and all that kind of stuff. And it goes on the calendar, but he does that a lot more than I do.

**Jennifer, Role-reversed mother**

Her partner Brian provided a similar account and explained that because he does the school run, 'I know more of the parents. So I'm in touch with mostly mums, you know, for playdates and things like that and parties.' Finally, breadwinning mother Ellie described a 'low tech' system she and her partner use to share the management equally:

“ Again, I think we’re probably pretty even with that. I mean, we’ve got quite a sort of democratic system in place, I suppose, which is fairly low tech but works well for us. So we have a shared calendar, Ryan and I both have access to on our phones, and we’ve got a whiteboard that’s up in the dining room as well which sort of sets out everything we’ve got planned for the week, and it’s also got a section for things to do. So for example, at the moment it’s got, you know, collect prescription from the chemist, it’s got ring the health visitor team, and it’s got arrange these interviews, and they’re sort of colour coded so that we each know, you know, we agree which tasks we’re going to do between us. I’d say it tends to be, it tends to be pretty even for things like, you know, arranging appointments and activities.

**Ellie, Role-reversed mother**

## How equal sharers organise time in paid work and childcare

Examining what exactly equal sharing looks like can highlight routes to greater gender equality in the family. What are the trade-offs faced by couples who wish to share equally? Do mothers compromise their time with children similarly to male breadwinners? Do fathers compromise their careers similarly to female caregivers? To answer these questions, we compared how time is distributed in the three parenting arrangements. The survey respondents reported their weekly hours of work and childcare, as well as the hours they spent providing childcare together with their partners, and the weekly hours the child spent in non-parental care (e.g. day-care, school, grandparents).

The analysis aimed to reveal whether male equal sharers work less than traditional fathers, whether female equal sharers provide less childcare than traditional mothers, and whether equally shared parenting is achieved through increased or decreased use of non-parental care.

Both fathers and mothers who shared equally worked shorter hours than fathers and mothers who were the main breadwinners. Equal sharers’ personal incomes were lower than main breadwinners’ incomes but as a family they earned more. On average, equal sharers provided two more weekly hours of childcare each compared to main breadwinners, and their children spent approximately nine more hours per week in non-parental care. Equality was therefore achieved through a combination of using more hours of non-parental care, and each parent working slightly shorter hours and providing slightly longer hours of childcare.

The results presented in Figure 3 indicate that fathers and mothers who shared equally worked shorter hours (35 and 32 weekly hours respectively) than fathers and mothers who were the main breadwinners (42 hours on average). Equal sharers’ personal incomes were lower than main breadwinners’ incomes but their total family income was higher.

These differences in work hours between main breadwinners and equal sharers partially translated into differences in childcare hours. As shown in Figure 4, equal sharers provided between 13 and 15 weekly hours of childcare each, compared 10-12 hours provided by main breadwinners. The mean weekly hours which both parents spent together with their children as a family ranged from 26 to 31 and did not vary significantly by parenting arrangement. However, the children of equal sharers spent approximately 20-25 hours per week in non-parental care (e.g. day-care/school), compared to an average of 12-16 hours in families with a clear breadwinner/caregiver division of roles (see Figure 5).

These results from the survey data suggest that equal sharing of childcare was achieved through a combination of shorter work hours compared to main breadwinners, slightly longer childcare hours provided by each of the working parents, and longer hours of non-parental care.

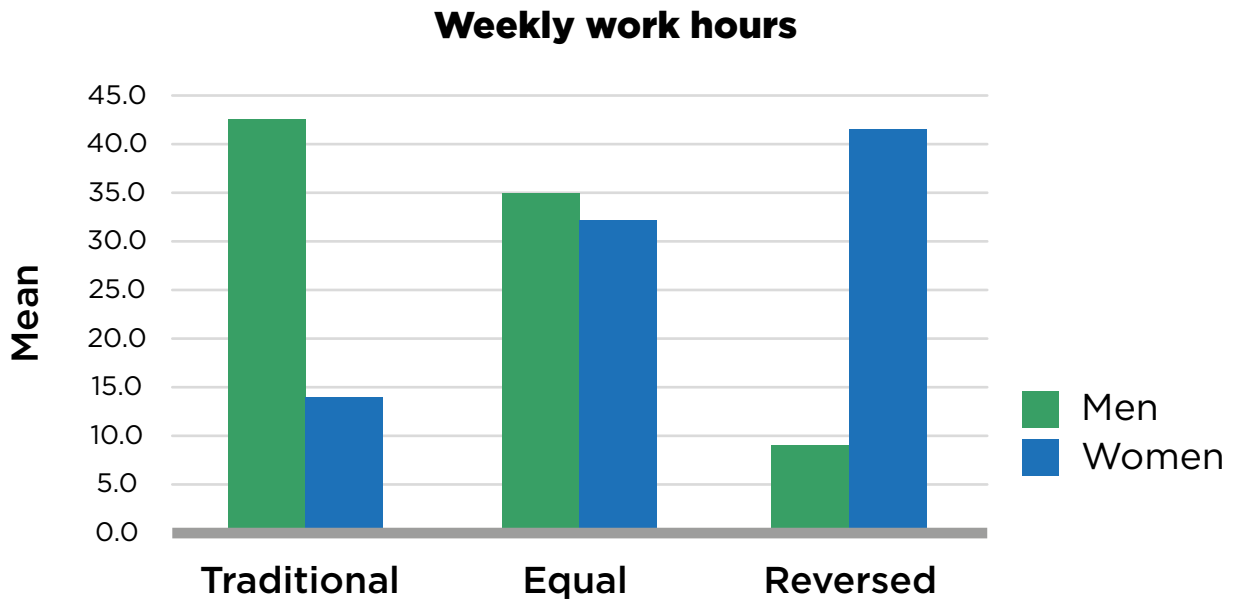


Figure 3: How many hours in total do you currently spend doing either paid work or studying in a typical week?

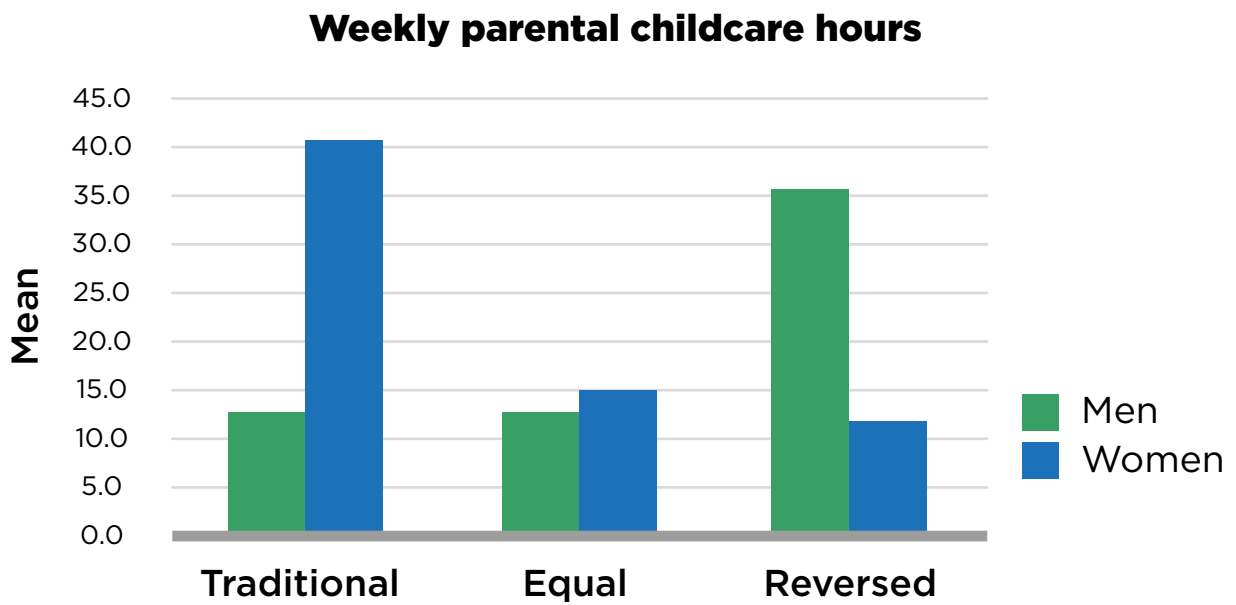


Figure 4: How many hours in total do you tend to spend alone with your child(ren) in a typical week (when they are awake)?

## Weekly hours of non-parental care

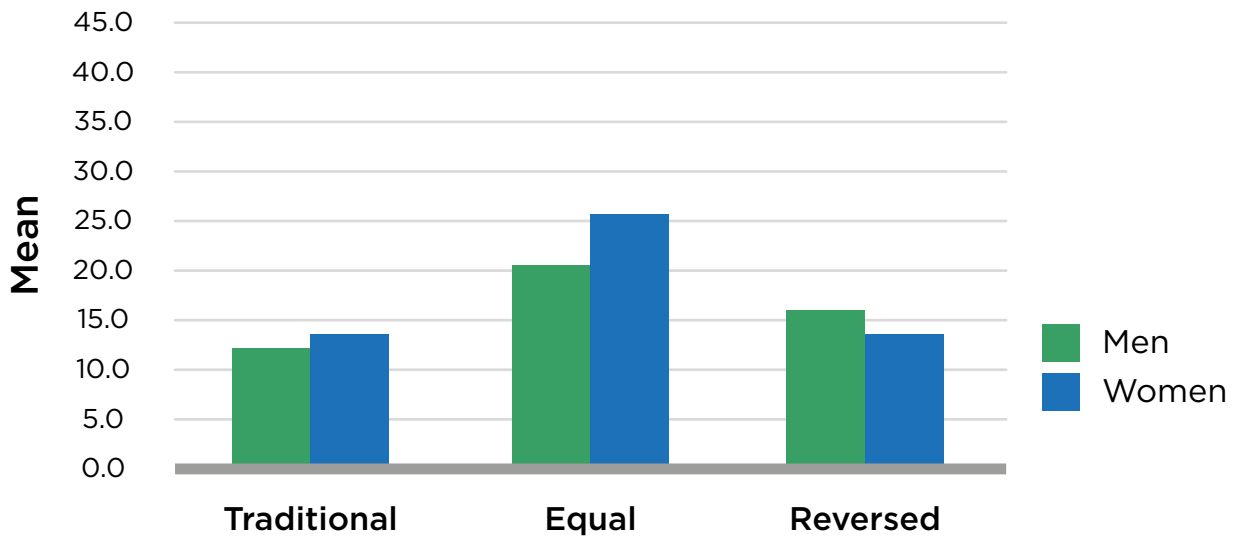


Figure 5: How many hours in total does another person (i.e. not you or your partner) spend caring for your youngest child (e.g. at school, grandparents, nursery, babysitting etc.)?

The in-depth interviews provided further insight into how these weekly hours of work and childcare were distributed. Specifically, when equal sharers had preschool children, they often relied on day-care for part of the week and split the remaining time equally between them. For example, Rob explained that their daughter ‘used to go to nursery three days a week. She’d go Wednesday, Thursday, Friday. So on Monday, I’d have [her] all day, and on Tuesday, Patricia would have [her] all day.’

The considerations that led equal sharers to split childcare in this manner included the desire of both parents to spend more time with the child, as well as reducing childcare costs:

“ I think we decided quite early on that both of us working five days a week and five days a week of childcare just felt like too much. It felt like then you have to jam all the kind of life stuff and kid stuff into two days, and it didn’t seem like enough time with [son] for either of us. So I think that was always our plan from quite early on in my Maternity Leave, was for us to kind of flex our schedules so that we would have that one day, and it saves quite a bit of money as well, like nursery’s really expensive.

**Claire, Equal sharing mother**

### Taking turns: Couples balancing family roles over longer periods of time

Across the interview sample, and particularly among couples who reversed roles, there was evidence for the arrangement changing back and forth over time depending on the circumstances. Some couples therefore balanced out the division of work and childcare over longer periods of time rather than on a daily or weekly basis, attempting to give both parents the opportunity to spend time with their children as well as pursuing their careers.

For example, when Meera and Liam considered having a baby, she was running a business and he had a job which he liked but was also very demanding. Liam explained that his job ‘was very all encompassing, I was very much like on-call all the time, kind of thing, and it was very difficult to turn off, so I wouldn’t have been a very good father had I stayed.’ Meera therefore suggested ‘let’s, you’ve, you’ve done this for me, like you’ve taken on winning all the bread so that I could quit my job and start again. Let’s do it the other way around’. They agreed on this plan and when Meera got pregnant Liam quit his job to become the main caregiver. Having been a stay-at-home dad for three years, at the time of the interview Liam expected the division to change again as their son is ‘joining pre-school in September, so that’s when I’m going to start working again and it’s going to be very odd not having him around all the time and not being the main influence on his life. But at the same time, it’s good for him, and that’s the priority around it.’

In another case, Kirsty described how she and her partner moved from a traditional arrangement to reversing roles and ended up sharing equally. After she stayed home for a year with each of their children, 'I went back to work part-time for a year and then...we decided that Patrick would leave his job and I would go back to work full-time. So he left his job because he was miserable and working long hours and he hadn't seen enough of the kids and just was over it. I went back to work full-time and he was home for a year and a half.' Kirsty recalls the considerations they made:

“...we felt we had the space to make a conscious decision about our priorities that, that he, he could stay in the job and we'd have more money and we could go on expensive holidays. **Or he could leave his job and we could have less money but he could have more time with the kids and, and that's what we together chose.** Yeah and it does feel like mostly we're sort of consciously making those decisions around time with the children.

**Kirsty, Equal sharing mother, our emphasis**

Patrick later started a business 'and since then it's been more even in terms of the sorta shared responsibility,' Kirsty explained.

Jenny and Tim had a traditional arrangement when they decided that Tim would quit his job, become the main caregiver for six months, and then retrain as a teacher to enable him to be more involved in childcare. Jenny recalls their discussion:

“So it was an active choice. **Okay, do I wanna carry on doing this for the rest of my life, working nine till five, not seeing the children that much,** apart from at weekends, or take it as an opportunity? So we talked about that, we took the opportunity, took the voluntary redundancy. It fitted in well with me being able to go back to work, and changed his career into education, because [...] if you're a teacher, you're always gonna be home during the holidays, you get to spend that time with your children.

**Jenny, Traditional mother, our emphasis**

Finally, Maternity Leave sometimes triggered a temporary switch to a traditional arrangement among role-reversed couples:

“It's changed over the years. So Joshua was the stay-at-home parent with [daughter] originally and I only had like four weeks mat [maternity] leave, five weeks mat leave. Went back to work and he, he pretty much did everything. ... And then when I had [son], I took a year's Maternity Leave so I spent, I did all the kind of stay-at-home stuff for a good sort of seven months of that. He had a bit of time off at the beginning where we did it together and we kinda co-parented. And then he went to work while I stayed at home. And then when my Maternity Leave ended I went back to work and he kind of resumed that full-time parenting role.

**Meg, Role-reversed mother**

Joshua and Meg, however, would have preferred to each participate more equally in work and childcare at the same time, but could not due to lack of access to better-paid flexible or part-time jobs (see Section 3). While swapping roles meant that parents might be able to even things out in the longer term, for many couples, the need to take turns partly derived from work constraints that make it more difficult for workers to also be carers.



## **2. State Policies: Maternity Leave, Paternity Leave and Shared Parental Leave**

## **Current State Policies and Entitlements**

An outline of some key aspects of current state policies is given below. This overview summarises only statutory entitlements for biological fathers and mothers as this is most relevant to the context of the study.

### **Statutory Paternity Leave and Paternity Pay**

Fathers can choose to take either one or two consecutive weeks of Statutory Paternity Leave. Leave cannot start before the birth, and it must end within 56 days of the birth (or of the due date if the baby is early). To be eligible for Statutory Paternity Leave, the father must be classed as an employee (different rules apply to other employment types such as agency workers) and have worked continuously for an employer for 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth.

Statutory Paternity Pay is paid at a flat rate per week (currently £156.66 a week) or 90% of average weekly earnings, whichever is lower. Tax and National Insurance are deducted. To qualify for Statutory Paternity Pay, the father must still be employed on the day the child is born and earn at least £123 a week (gross) in an 8 week 'relevant period'.

### **Statutory Maternity Leave and Maternity Pay**

Statutory Maternity Leave is 52 weeks and mothers are required to take a least 2 weeks' leave after the baby is born (or 4 weeks for factory employees). To be eligible for Statutory Maternity Leave, the mother must be an employee (not a 'worker'). Entitlement is not dependent on length of time with employer, numbers of hours worked, or pay.

Statutory Maternity Pay is paid for up to 39 weeks at 90% of average weekly earnings (before tax) for the first 6 weeks, then at a flat rate of £156.66 a week or 90% of average weekly earnings (whichever is lower) for the next 33 weeks. Tax and National Insurance are deducted. To qualify for Statutory Maternity Pay, the mother must have worked for their employer continuously for at least 26 weeks continuing into the 15th week before the expected week of childbirth, and earn on average at least £123 a week.

### **Shared Parental Leave and Pay**

Shared Parental Leave allows birth mothers to share part of their Maternity Leave and Maternity Pay with their partners. Eligible parents can share up to 50 weeks of Shared Parental Leave and up to 37 weeks of Statutory Parental Pay. The pay and leave must be shared in the first year after the child is born, and can be taken in blocks separated by periods of work or all in one go. Parents can choose to be off work together or to stagger the leave and pay.

Shared Parental Pay is paid at the rate of £156.66 a week or 90% of average weekly earnings, whichever is lower. This is the same as Statutory Maternity Pay except that during the first 6 weeks Statutory Maternity Pay is paid at 90% of earnings (with no maximum).

For the mother's partner to take Shared Parental Leave and Shared Parental Pay, the mother must have been working for at least 26 weeks out of the 66 weeks before the week the baby is due and have earned at least £390 in total across any 13 of the 66 weeks. The mother's partner must have been employed continuously by the same employer for at least 26 weeks by the end of the 15th week before the due date and stay with the same employer until they start their Shared Parental Leave. To be eligible for Shared Parental Leave, the partner must be an 'employee' (not a 'worker'). To be eligible for Shared Parental Pay, the partner must earn on average at least £123 a week.

## Who stays home after the birth of a child and for how long

The duration of leave taken by parents after the birth of a child was relatively unaffected by their individual roles as main caregivers or main breadwinners and was largely determined by their gender instead. Although mothers in traditional arrangements tended to stay home longer than mothers who were equal sharers or main breadwinners, there were no significant differences between the three groups. Men’s duration of leave did vary by their family role but was much shorter than women’s in all three arrangements.

This disparity between patterns of leave and the way couples shared family roles otherwise is likely to reflect the gendered state policies around Maternity and Paternity leave. These policies seem to prevent couples from sharing leave in a way which is consistent with their arrangement of sharing paid work and childcare.

The survey respondents were asked how many weeks of leave they took when their youngest child was born, including Maternity or Paternity Leave, Shared Parental Leave, annual leave, carer leave, unpaid time off work, or any other type.

The results shown in Figure 6 suggest that the total duration of leave taken by parents was strongly determined by gender rather than family roles.

**Total number of weeks of leave taken after the birth of the youngest child**

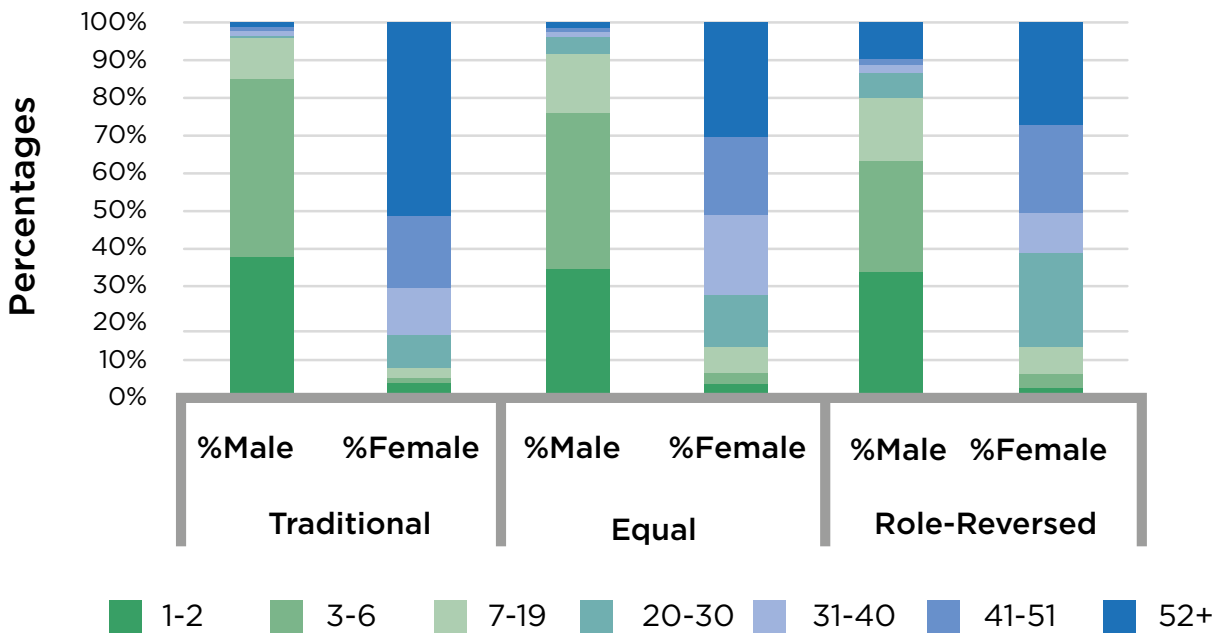


Figure 6: Approximately how many weeks, if any, of each of the following types of work leave did you personally take when your youngest child was born?



The vast majority of mothers in all groups stayed home for at least five months (most often more than 8 months), with only 6% of the female primary caregivers, 11% of equal sharers, and 12% of breadwinners reporting a leave shorter than five months.

These patterns are in stark contrast to fathers' duration of leave, with the vast majority staying home for less than 1.5 months. However, fathers' family role did have a significant effect on their duration of leave, with 44% of the male primary caregivers reporting a leave longer than 1.5 months, compared to 30% of equal sharers, and only 17% of main breadwinners. Fathers who took a longer leave typically combined paternal leave, family/carer leave, and Shared Parental Leave, complemented with annual leave and unpaid leave.

Overall, the duration of leave taken after the birth of a child was not in line with parents' family roles. This is in contrast with all other indicators of parenting arrangements reported above, where parents' involvement in work and childcare followed their parenting arrangement and roles as main caregivers and breadwinners. When it comes to the duration of leave, a parent's gender was the main determinant of their duration of leave while their family role had little effect.

The findings from our in-depth interviews which we discuss below highlight the barriers faced by men in taking leave, such as state policies, cultural norms and workplace cultures (cf. Burgess & Davies, 2020; Kaufman, 2018). The pattern of behaviour observed in the survey data can be attributed to these barriers, and above all to the gendered state policies around Maternity and Paternity Leave. Equal sharers and role-reversed couples were limited by these leave policies and forced to take leave in line with their gender rather than their arrangement of sharing paid work and childcare.

## Unpacking leave-taking - why parents make the choices they do

The in-depth interviews explored parents' considerations, decision-making process and experiences of taking leave after the birth of a child. The data show that entitlement to paid leave was central to decision making around parenting leave across all couple categories, including the timing of mothers' return to work and fathers' comparable lack of leave-taking. In all three categories, fathers took a much shorter duration of leave than mothers for financial reasons.

All the mothers had returned to paid work in some form after their Maternity Leave, including those with traditional arrangements. This decision was primarily motivated by financial concerns but also identity factors (discussed in the following sections). In contrast, some of the primary caregiving fathers did not engage in paid work at all.

## Maternity Leave

Many of the equal sharing and breadwinning mothers described a tension between a desire to take the maximum amount of Maternity Leave they could (usually six, nine or twelve months) and wanting to return to work to retain a sense of professional self-identity. These mothers were worried about feeling isolated, losing part of their identity or being disadvantaged at work as a result of having taken Maternity Leave. Returning to work, in turn, sometimes elicited feelings of guilt. One equal sharing mother recalled:

“...I just wanted to have that time with them when they were little. I just felt it was really important.

**However [laughs], looking back, I couldn't wait to get back to work ... I remember saying to Luke at one point, I just felt like I'd lost my identity.** I was just mum. I just wanted to be Lily again, like Lily the nurse with some sort of purpose of work. Like, obviously I love being a mum, but it's lonely, isn't it, at times, when you're sort of stuck by yourself with a baby.

**Lily, Equal sharing mother, our emphasis**

Both mothers and fathers worried about the impact Maternity Leave has on women's careers. Some breadwinning mothers had experienced poor treatment at work (for example, sexist comments, discrimination or missed promotions), which they attributed to being mothers.

“ I was dreading telling [my boss] I was pregnant again actually. She was fine about it but you could tell that she made comments ... there was quite a few people that were off on [Maternity] Leave when I went off and she was, made a few comments like, **“I should stop employing all you thirty year old women”.**

**Nicole, Role-reversed mother, our emphasis**

“ I have had negative comments about, you know, both times I’ve disclosed to my colleagues that I was pregnant, I’ve had lots of sexist comments, I’ve had lots of inappropriate comments, I’ve very much felt that I’ve been an inconvenience.

**Lucy, Role-reversed mother**

For equal sharing mothers, the Maternity Leave policies of their employer constituted a key factor in their decision to stay in (or leave) a job. For example, women are often not entitled to their employers’ maternity package until they have been in a role for a certain period of time:

“ I was...planning on getting pregnant. That was a reason for me to stay in a job I disliked. And I think that affects women’s careers. I’ve seen a lot of women choose, you know, when they’re trying and maybe...less successful at getting pregnant or having pregnancy loss that they’re then staying in a job that actually makes them deeply unhappy or doesn’t stimulate them enough and does, they don’t progress because they’re like, ‘but I’m trying to do this other thing. I’m trying to have a baby and if I leave now and then I get pregnant, I won’t get any maternity pay.

**Beth, Equal sharing mother**

Participants in our research reported that others made assumptions about how much Maternity Leave the mothers would take. The primary breadwinning mothers in this sample reported being criticised by others about taking a seemingly short Maternity Leave. Similarly, the equal sharing mothers described colleagues commenting on the length of their Maternity Leave (whether seemingly too long or too short) and their subsequent return to work. One mother explained:

“ ...I said at the beginning that I only wanted to take six months Maternity Leave rather than the full year, that was also met with some surprise because people said, ‘oh I thought mothers wanted to take as long as they wanted off’. **And when I explained that my husband was gonna take three months following my six-month Maternity Leave, they didn’t understand that. They didn’t understand that that was an option.**

**Sarah, Equal sharing mother, our emphasis**

Another equal-sharing mother commented on the normative pressure regarding long Maternity Leave and the lack of legitimisation for diverse experiences:

“ I’d always been very open about the fact that being home alone with a newborn for months on end is just really challenging to me, and I think it’s challenging to more women than will openly admit it as well, because it’s seen as we’re supposed to be, **we’re supposed to think of it as like some of the best time of our lives** or something.

**Grace, Equal sharing mother, our emphasis**

Across all couple categories, biological reasons were given for mothers’ longer leave periods than fathers following the birth of a child. These reasons included the need to physically recover after the birth and to establish breastfeeding. The breadwinning mothers in particular described wanting to stay at home with their babies for as long as possible in order to breastfeed and bond with them (continuing breastfeeding while working is often not adequately supported by employers, as discussed further below).

Once they returned to work, some of the breadwinning mothers felt able to empathise with their primary caregiving partners because they understood the challenges of caring for children all day while also handling housework, given their Maternity Leave experiences.

“ When the children were very small, I worked as flexibly as I could to help out, because leaving someone at home, you know, baby twins and a toddler, it's really hard work. But because I was at home so much with them on Maternity Leave, I knew how hard work it was. Cause I think a lot of men aren't aware how hard work it is, cause they've never really done it, but because I have, I know how exhausting it is, I constantly felt guilty that I was going into work. Not because I was leaving my children in a way that a lot of mothers might feel. But I felt guilty leaving Brian with the kids because I knew how exhausting it was.

**Jennifer, Role-reversed mother**

The equal sharing fathers also showed some empathy towards their partners given their understanding of what childcare involved. In contrast, the breadwinning fathers did not have this experience to draw upon, having taken relatively short periods of Paternity Leave and being less involved in childcare thereafter.

## **Paternity Leave**

The breadwinning and equal sharing fathers tended to take two weeks' statutory Paternity Leave and sometimes extended this using their annual leave allowance. The practice of adding annual leave is an individualised response to short and often low paid Paternity Leave (not all employers 'top up' statutory Paternity Pay, while annual leave is on full pay). The equal sharing couples felt that they could not manage financially if the father took more than the statutory two weeks Paternity Leave, since they were reliant on two incomes. Most of the primary caregiving fathers were not entitled to paid Paternity Leave and took unpaid leave or annual leave. Mothers' greater attachment to work and/or higher earnings, coupled with fathers' demanding or disliked jobs had sometimes triggered a decision to stop working altogether and stay at home with their children.

In all couple categories, the fathers cited (un) supportive managers as influencing how much leave they took when their child was born. They often felt they were reliant on understanding bosses in order to access leave for parenting, rather than their choices being facilitated by workplace policies. Employers were generally

supportive of fathers taking the minimal two weeks' statutory Paternity Leave but not necessarily longer periods of leave.

“ You look at Maternity Leave and **a woman gets six months to a year off work, a man can have two weeks Paternity Leave. I think it's an absolute joke.** Parenting is the hardest thing you can ever do, so to say that one person has to be limited to doing it whilst the other one doesn't.

**Edward, Role-reversed father, our emphasis**

Some of the breadwinning fathers said they wished they could have taken longer Paternity Leave but were prevented from doing so because of pressure at work or their employers not offering longer leave at the point at which their children were born:

“ I think I've had three weeks off with them. The two weeks paternity pay and then I had a week's holiday. Same wi' [son] actually. You know, all three a' them it would have been two, two, three weeks. It's frustrating, you know, cause my employers just changed that to six weeks so that would have been nice [laughs]. But no, yeah we took two weeks off.

**Nick, Traditional father**

Equal sharing and breadwinning fathers also described difficulties upon returning to work after Paternity Leave (for example, missing their children while at work), however ultimately, they felt this was the right thing to do for financial reasons.

## **Shared Parental Leave (SPL)**

Our qualitative data show mixed feelings about SPL across all couple categories. The main reason couples gave for not accessing the SPL scheme was not being able to afford a reduction in the father's income. The role-reversed couples were mostly not using the statutory Shared Parental Leave policy but rather relying on the mother's income to

support the family while the father assumed a primary caregiver role. Some of these couples felt that take up of SPL would be inhibited due to mothers' unwillingness to 'give up' their Maternity Leave as they would not have as much time with their child after returning to full time work. Some equal sharing and traditional couples also mentioned that mothers did not want to miss out on time with their babies.

There is a lack of visibility and knowledge about SPL schemes. Whereas couples with traditional arrangements had not necessarily considered taking SPL, equal sharers and role-reversed couples tended to feel that uptake was low because employers were not aware of how the SPL leave scheme worked. Fathers in all categories cited a lack of male role models as a key barrier to using the SPL scheme.

**“** You can't look at an example and say ah, well that worked, that didn't affect that person, that person still thrived and they still got what they wanted out of work and managed to get a different balance with their home life, you can't, you can't see those examples around you, so I guess you, being the first to jump into that situation is a pretty scary thing, I think.

**Mark, Traditional father**

**“** We should have examples in public life of men taking care of their kids. We need examples to follow. I mean, I don't think, you know, our current political leaders do it.

**Ben, Equal sharing father**

The fathers described the lack of role models as discouraging. Only a few fathers felt that they could set a precedent for the scheme in their workplaces, suggesting that proactive workplace cultures are necessary so that being 'the first' is less intimidating. One equal-sharing father, Jim, felt more able to ask for SPL knowing that his line manager worked compressed hours.

**“** My line manager does condensed hours. So he didn't take time off but he does condensed hours so I knew that was possible. And as soon as I went to them and said, "this is what I want to do", they said, "yeah brilliant, that's no problem, we'll sort that out". So that was fantastic. And I was actually the first person to do Shared Parental Leave there so they had to work out [laughs] how that worked.

**Jim, Equal sharing father**

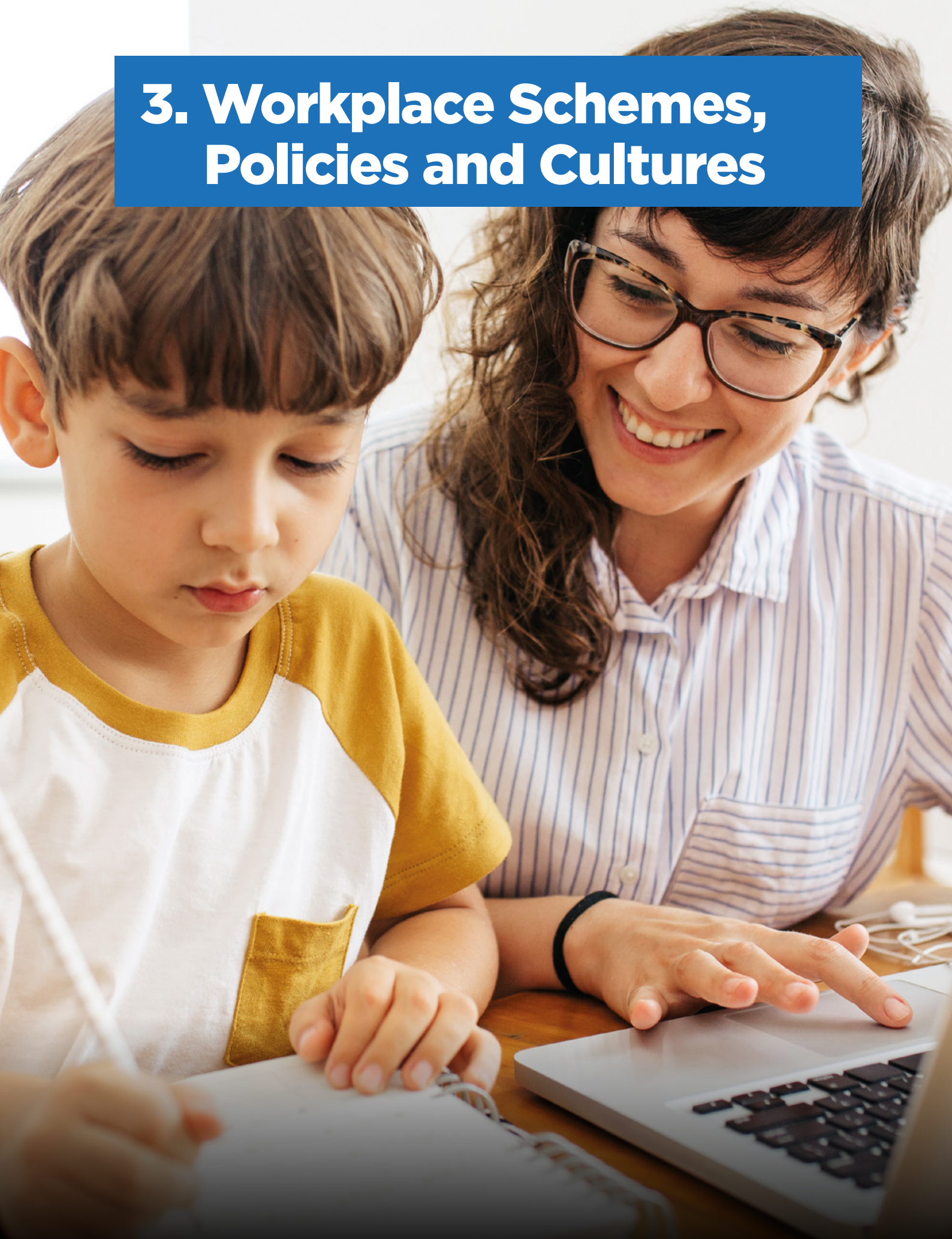
Findings from our interviews show that there is support for a non-transferable model of leave for parenting by fathers across all couple categories. Both mothers and fathers talked about the 'use it or lose it' model as an effective means to encouraging fathers to take leave.

Breadwinning mothers, primary caregiving fathers and primary caregiving mothers saw SPL as an opportunity for both partners to develop parenting skills. Primary caregiving mothers talked about learning new skills during Maternity Leave, relating to both childcare and housework. Role-reversed couples tended to think that having some leave for parenting *at the same time* would allow parents to learn and bond with the baby together, rather than doing this alone at different times. Meera described the benefits of this:

**“** We really enjoyed that time together, it was really, really good for us and it meant that we then headed on into the parenting journey both knowing what it was like to be with a child all the time for a long time. So that wasn't alien to either of us. **So neither of us felt like that wasn't our thing or that wasn't our sphere.**

**Meera, Role-reversed mother, our emphasis**

### **3. Workplace Schemes, Policies and Cultures**



## Current State Policy on Flexible Working

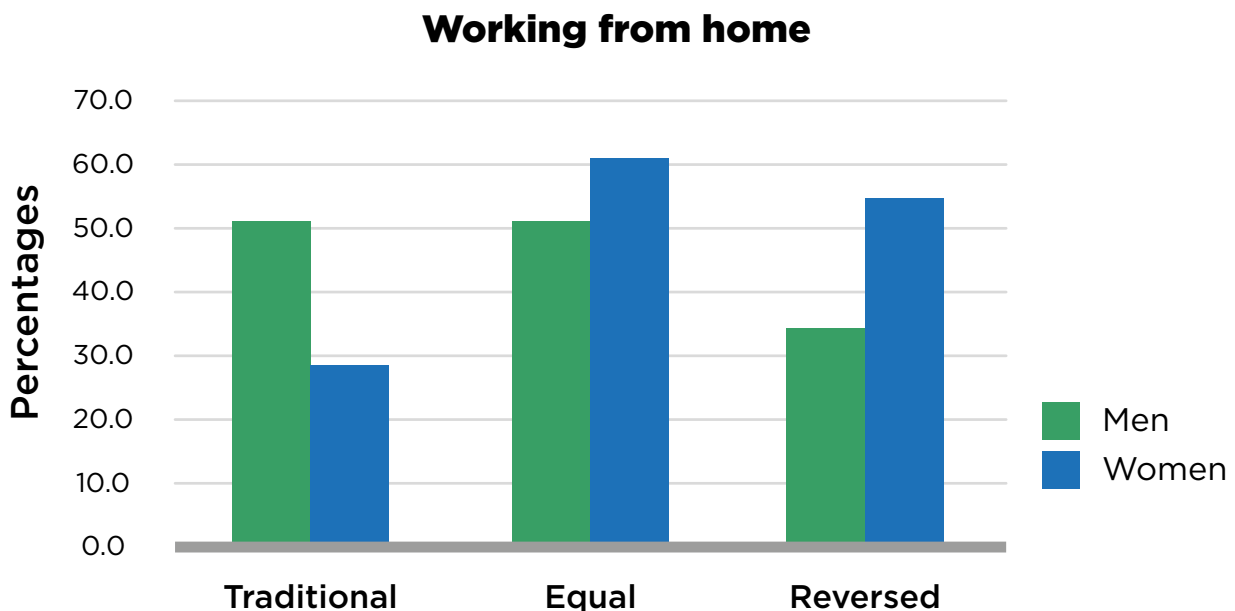
Flexible working is a way of working that suits an employee's needs, for example having flexible start and finish times, or working from home. All employees who have worked for the same employer for at least 26 weeks have the legal right to request flexible working (make a 'statutory request'). Employers are required to deal with requests in a 'reasonable manner' and must normally make a decision within 3 months. Employers can refuse an application if they have a good business reason for doing so. Employees can only make one application for flexible working a year. (Flexible working rules are different in Northern Ireland)

## Work from home, flexible hours and part-time working

Since the birth of the youngest child, male breadwinners and equal sharers have used work from home and flexible hours less than female breadwinners and equal sharers, while male and female caregivers were similarly likely to use these schemes. Working fewer than 30 hours per week at any time since the birth of the child was much more prevalent among women in each of the parenting arrangements compared to their male counterparts.

The survey respondents were asked to indicate whether they have used a range of workplace arrangements at any time since their youngest child was born<sup>2</sup>. The results showed that approximately half of the breadwinners and equal sharers worked from home for some or all of the week (see Figure 7). Working from home

was particularly prevalent among female equal sharers (more than 60%). Similarly widespread were flexible working hours, particularly among mothers (see Figure 8). More than 60% of the female breadwinners and equal sharers have worked flexibly, compared to fewer than 50% of the breadwinning fathers<sup>3</sup>.

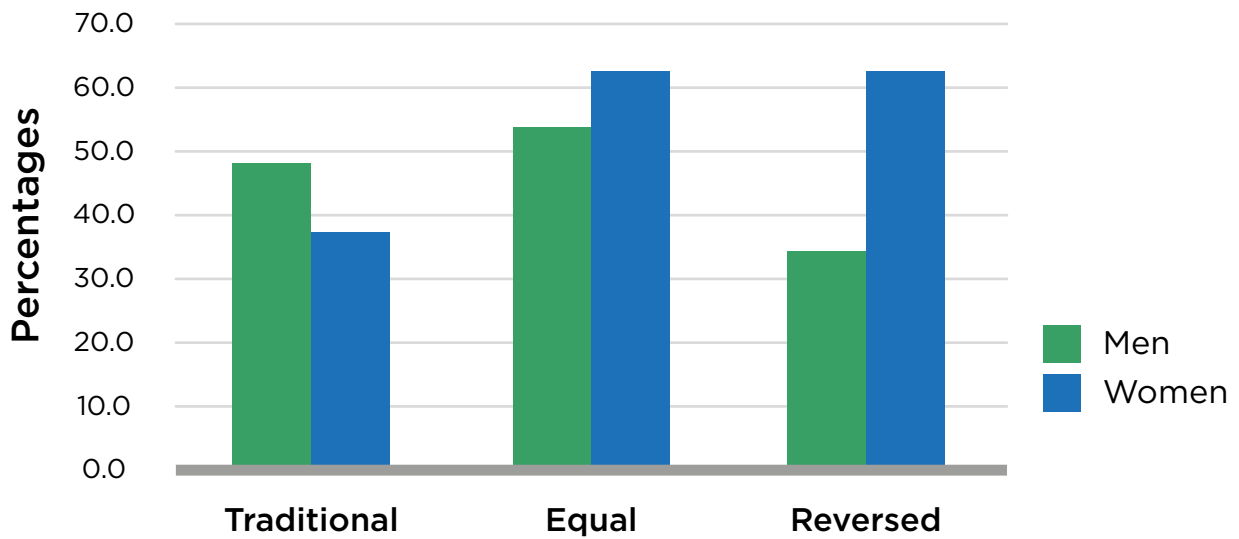


Figures 7: Which, if any, of the following have you personally used at work at any time since your youngest child was born?

<sup>2</sup> These results reflect pre-pandemic work patterns as the survey data were collected in February 2020

<sup>3</sup> Other types of work schemes were used by less than 10% of the respondents in any of the study groups

## Flexible working



Figures 8: Which, if any, of the following have you personally used at work at any time since your youngest child was born?

## Working part-time

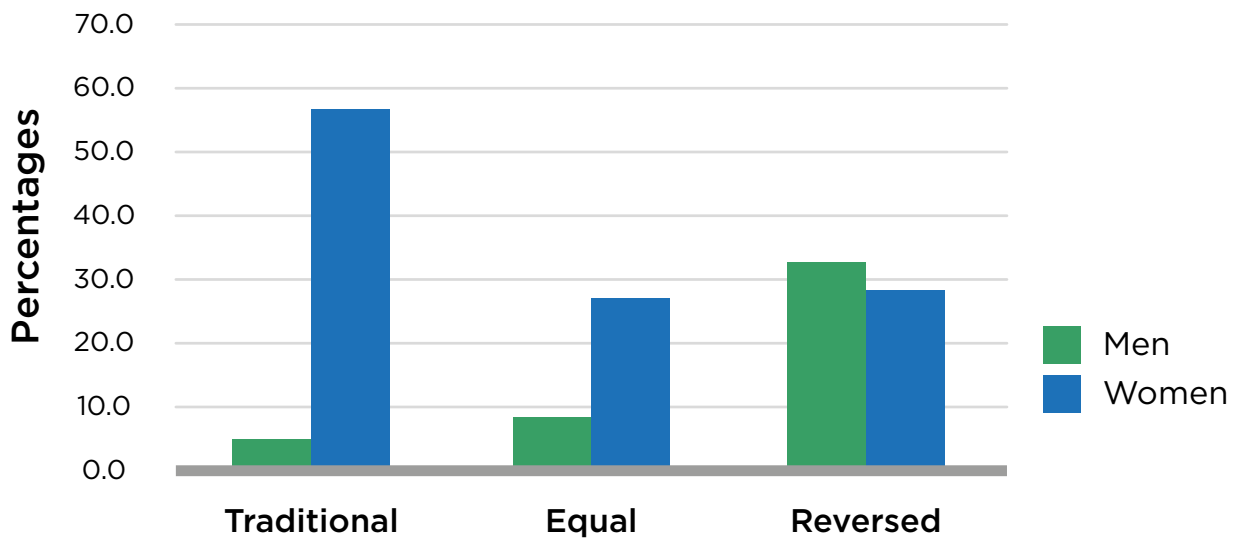


Figure 9: Which, if any, of the following have you personally used at work at any time since your youngest child was born?

The most striking gender difference emerged in relation to working part-time jobs. Figure 9 shows that only 4% of the male breadwinners and 8% of the male equal sharers have worked less than 30 hours per week at any time since their youngest child was born, while 28% of the female breadwinners and equal sharers have done so. Among the primary caregivers, 57% of the mothers and 31% of the fathers have worked part-time.

Unlike the survey data which were gathered before the pandemic, the in-depth interviews took place during the Covid-19 pandemic, when 'normal' work arrangements had

significantly shifted. Given this context, most of the couples who took part across the equal sharing, role-reversed and traditional categories had increased elements of flexibility in their schedules, and many were regularly working from home, some for the first time. The qualitative analysis extends the quantitative analysis by considering how couples experience different workplace arrangements, such as working from home, part-time and flexible working. It also examines barriers to mothers and fathers accessing flexible and part-time working, along with additional themes that came up in the interviews, such as difficulties with transitions back to work for mothers (for

example, lack of support for breastfeeding), and access to various forms of leave (for example, compassionate and dependants' leave<sup>4</sup>). Finally, a key emerging aspect was the realities of making use of workplace schemes, workplace cultures, and reliance on understanding colleagues and managers.

## Benefits of working from home for family life

The pandemic increased challenges with combining work and family life for many of our participants. However, the parents we interviewed also identified some positives of changes in workplace arrangements and cultures. Working from home (where possible) was overwhelmingly identified by mothers and fathers as beneficial to managing childcare, for example, for sharing school drop-offs and pick-ups particularly where long commutes would otherwise be necessary daily. While some of the parents had officially been able to work from home before the pandemic, they felt that there had been barriers to doing so in practice, such as expectations from other colleagues to always be present, that were now removed. For others, this was a new experience and the majority felt home working on some days helped. As Emily, a mother in a traditional arrangement, explained: 'It's improved my work-life balance [...] I can be around the kids.'

Many parents appreciated the opportunity to spend more time as a family and have more involvement with their children. For Tim, the pandemic meant working from home every day, which enabled him to be more present in their son's life and experience a lot of 'first times' and build a stronger bond:

“ I've been able to watch him grow and I can see the changes daily, whereas when I was away and I was in the office or whatnot, [partner] would tell me he's done something for the first time and I would, I would always have to hear about things, I'd never see them, which was heart breaking, really heart breaking to not be there for those first moments, whereas being at home, and always being at home, I've seen so many firsts. You know, I can hear his first words, I can see him, you know, the first time kicking a ball, and silly little things, but it's all of these firsts, and I've been there for them, and that's given me, that's made me feel much closer to him, it's helped really strengthen the bond, it's helped me grow as a parent because I have more experience, more practice.

**Tim, Traditional father**

Lisa suggested that her partner working from home post pandemic allowed a more equal division of childcare between them:

“ We split things pretty much equally, especially since he started working from home after Covid [...] I have someone to share that morning routine with now and it is, just makes such a difference [...] just having that backup, actually everything's a lot easier since he's been working from home.

**Lisa, Equal sharing mother**

For some, family life was made more visible as a result of Covid-19 and this made it more acceptable to be seen as a worker who is also a parent. For example, in some workplaces taking children to meetings was encouraged and, in some cases, extra provision was made for childcare such as additional dependants' leave.

Difficulties for families were exacerbated where organisations were less sensitive to employees' needs during the pandemic, especially when parents struggled due to school and nursery closures. Anastasia, a primary caregiving mother commented that there were lots of children in team meetings at her work but at her husband's workplace things 'were totally

<sup>4</sup> Employees are entitled to time off to deal with an emergency involving a dependant, but there is no requirement that this leave be paid



different. You know, the kids should be quiet, they shouldn't enter the room'. Tony, an equal sharing father, felt there was a lack of clarity from management during the pandemic (and more generally) in relation to child-related absence, and that the general approach was that 'everyone's in the same boat, you just have to work and parent at the same time'. The participants reported pressures to operate as normal and not to slow down due to childcare. At times, both fathers and mothers felt guilty that they could not be the parents they wanted to be due to juggling work and childcare.

This 'business as usual' approach meant some partners had to 'absorb' additional childcare while maintaining their own paid work. Primary breadwinning mothers and fathers worked from home more but were not always able to share the increased childcare load, especially where Covid-19 led to increased workloads. While there were benefits of home working for most parents in our study, then, home working is not sufficient where workloads are excessive and without accompanying recognition of workers as carers.

## **Flexible and part-time working (and barriers to these arrangements)**

Couples value flexibility in working hours and being able to organise non urgent tasks around childcare, as well as workplaces emphasising product/output-based, rather than time-based, work. Within our sample, most couples felt able to work on their own schedules to some extent, which helped with sharing childcare. Equal sharing couples more commonly noted that both or one partner(s) had access to some form of flexible hours. Luke explained that being able to 'get home relatively early' means 'I can be involved in all of those kind of daily rituals and routines that allow me to bear that equal load.'

Some parents, however, reported that flexible and part-time working requests were not supported, and they had to push for accommodations or that part-time or flexible roles were simply not available. Others felt that moving to part-time work was often not accompanied by a suitable reduction in work responsibilities, that they were still expected to be available on non-working days by full-time colleagues, and that effectively they would work the same hours for less pay, so that part-time work was not a meaningful option to increase time for parenting.

Juggling work and childcare was described as very demanding, especially where parents were

required to work long hours and experienced work stress. Some mothers in the role-reversed category suggested that they were only able to meet the requirements of their full-time, demanding jobs in senior positions successfully because their partner undertook most of the childcare. Ellie noted that her workload did not fit within full-time official hours and that she/colleagues regularly worked outside of them. She commented that employees in senior positions like hers may not be able to apply a flexible working policy because they are required to be constantly available and suggested this was why there were not many young women with children with senior roles in her company. Even with her husband as primary carer, Ellie expected to experience more, rather than less, work-family conflict in future. While there were people (mostly women) in her organisation who work part-time, they 'end up trying to do a full-time job but get paid fewer hours'. There were therefore limited practical options for Ellie if she wanted to stay in the organisation and maintain/progress her career.

Parents also experienced negative comments from others about changing working patterns. For example, Kirsty, an equal sharing mother, talked about inappropriate comments from a senior male colleague that her flexible working arrangement would negatively impact on her career. Adam, an equal sharing father, felt that part-time workers were perceived as less important than full-time workers in his workplace. Reflecting this, Anastasia, a primary caregiving mother, suggested that there was a pervasive idea that many jobs cannot be done effectively part-time.

Joshua, a main caregiver, had some positive experiences on returning from Shared Parental Leave. However, he wanted to work less to be more involved in childcare and, despite him feeling that he had made constructive and feasible suggestions for how a job share might work, was told that the business could not accommodate him part-time or in a slightly different role.

While both women and men reported barriers to securing flexible and/or part-time working (especially for more desirable/senior roles), some of our participants suggested that this was particularly a problem for men and that it is more unusual for men to work in these ways. Harry, a father in a traditional arrangement, expressed guilt about his partner picking up more work and about not being present enough in his daughter's life: 'probably sounds like I'm just like a typical guy, I leave mum to do everything'. Despite this,

the couple had never discussed the possibility of Harry working less or requesting flexible working arrangements. He reflected:

“ I don't know, [it's] just not something that dads normally do [...] I know that's stupid, 'cause it shouldn't be like that, but you know, I would say that almost always, [it] **tends to be mums that go part-time when they have a child, isn't it? It's not dads.**

**Harry, Traditional father, our emphasis**

Lack of availability or access to different working patterns impacted on couples' choices. For example, Joshua and Meg, a role-reversed couple, suggested that they would prefer more equal opportunities to spend time with their children, but due to lack of better-paid flexible, part-time roles, they have instead alternated over time with one of them mostly parenting and the other working full-time. Mothers, especially in role-reversed couples, felt that there remains an implicit expectation that mothers will do all the childcare for babies and that lack of flexible and part-time working availability for men exacerbates this problem. Vicky explained:

“ The expectation is that the guy will do what is asked at work and like his home life will be around that but it's a woman who needs to arrange her work around family life ... When you have a child, automatically, mum is expected or presumed to be the lead parent.

**Vicky, Role-reversed mother**

Mothers in jobs with long hours were more likely to go part-time or to leave jobs they enjoyed for less time-consuming roles in order to minimise the extent to which work intrudes on family life. Beth, an equal sharing mother, had left her previous job despite it being a big change in the family income because it was 'unsustainable' in the long term – she wanted to spend more time with her daughter. Another mother in a role-reversed couple, Nicole, enjoyed her job and commented on the good routes to career progression and potential for her to earn a higher salary in future. However, she found it difficult to manage alongside childcare, so was planning to go part-time to make the conflict between work and home less fraught.

The experiences of these couples point to the importance of understanding work-care relationalities, and how these impact on the division of work and care within couples. The normalisation of flexible and part-time working for mothers and fathers helps couples who would prefer to share childcare and paid work more evenly. This is illustrated in Claire's comments about what could be improved for parents:

“ Normalisation of dads having flex-schedules and mums having flexi-schedules, and people realising that we're not just workers, we can be workers and we can be great workers, but we also are members of our community. We may be carers, we may be parents.

**Claire, Equal sharing mother**

## Disadvantages of flexible working

Flexible working, however, is not adequate on its own. 'Flexibility' can also have disadvantages where parents must work long and unsociable hours to keep up with work tasks. There was therefore some ambivalence around flexible working when accompanied by excessive work demands. As discussed further below, this impacted on wellbeing, as well as on the ability to participate fully in parenting.

Another difficulty arises where both parents have extensive work commitments, but only one of them works flexible hours. Primary caregiving mothers raised the issue that because they were more flexible, they consistently arranged their work around their partner's to facilitate childcare, as Olivia explained:

“ The nature of our jobs I would say means that **I have to be more flexible, but then I can be too,** so ... I sometimes worry about [...] how will we then manage things [...] if I'm once again commuting and [partner]'s got a lot of responsibility with his job, like how are we gonna fit in making sure that we get things done but also get to spend the quality time with [daughter]? [...] when I think of that, I worry. **I know I will give, because my job's more flexible.**

**Olivia, Traditional mother, our emphasis**

The flexibility of Olivia's job enabled the couple to manage but, when paired with the relative inflexibility of her partner's work meant she felt she 'had' to be more flexible. She therefore took on extra childcare at the expense of her work and both parents' quality time with their daughter. Lily, a mother in a traditional arrangement, was similarly ambivalent, recognising the benefits of flexibility, but also the trade-offs in terms of her work life:

“ Even when I'd got a full-time job and, you know, it was quite a busy, busy job, it was always the phone call would come to me, you know, one of them's ill, you need to come and get them or whatever, because at the time, [...] he was in a job where he couldn't just leave, couldn't just drop like that [...] I was always the first one that they'd call, and I'd be like, well, I've got to drop everything and go then. Which obviously you want to do as a parent, but you kind of at some points think, well I've got stuff on as well, why, why is what I'm doing any less important than what you're doing? And I think sometimes that has been a source of frustration, that it's ended up that way.

**Lily, Traditional mother, our emphasis**

Her partner Jack explained that he tried to make up for his absences when he was at home and 'share that load with Lily, because it is a massive load to run a house and to get the kids sorted and things like that.' Some of the other primary breadwinning fathers also felt guilty that their work was prioritised by default in these circumstances.

Uneven access to flexible working even impacted on equal sharing couples, where there is a very strong commitment to supporting each other's careers. For example, Jeremy, an equal sharing father, had a more stable, 'permanent' job with frequent 'urgent', non-negotiable deadlines. In contrast, his partner Claire held a fixed-term post, where tasks and deadlines were longer term and she largely set her own hours. Claire noted that she was the one who rearranged work around childcare, especially during the pandemic:

“ I think it's felt like his career has had the priority, although my career is more perhaps time consuming ... it's a tricky balance.

**Claire, Equal sharing mother**

Jeremy's career was inadvertently prioritised despite both recognising that Claire's work was more important to her, and that her career was likely to be damaged by taking time out of the workplace. As Jeremy put it, she was 'sacrificing herself'. The uncertainty of Claire's work towards the end of her fixed contract impacted on their decisions and she felt a 'bit stuck' and that the last year had been 'lost to childcare' when she should have been applying for new jobs. Overall, Claire always being the flexible one put a strain on them as parents and partners and was an issue for her career prospects in the longer term.

Overall, for most couples, work flexibility was a necessity for at least one parent to facilitate juggling work and care between them. However, the trade-off is sometimes extended and fragmented days. In addition, flexibility can exacerbate inequalities in arrangements and may lead to fewer opportunities for career progression, limited role choice and/or and worse "job quality" for parents (often the mother) (see also Global Institute for Women's Leadership 2021).

## Breastfeeding and gendered workplace cultures as a barrier to women's return to work

A key issue for breastfeeding mothers in balancing work and childcare is returning to work, given a widespread lack of workplace support for breastfeeding<sup>5</sup>. This was a significant problem for breadwinning mothers (but was also noted by one mother in an equal sharing couple). For example, Ellie mentioned that while facilities were provided, it was still not socially acceptable to breastfeed in her workplace. More commonly, her women colleagues would take a longer Maternity Leave and return when they stopped breastfeeding. Ellie was just about to return to work at the time of the interview and hoped to help normalise breastfeeding through her own example. However, she also reflected that, in practice, it would be difficult to do as it would add to the stress of a busy workplace to stop and feed her baby:

“ My job is pretty full on and I don't get much of an opportunity to have breaks in the middle of the day, so I'm gonna have to sort of change my working practices quite a lot in order to build in time to my day where I can actually take, you know, 15 minutes away to feed him. So yeah, it's quite stressful worrying about that actually. [...] it's been quite rare for me kind of coming up through the ranks of my organisation to see women who were breastfeeding and still managing to continue doing that at work. [...] I've asked managers before what are the breastfeeding facilities, you know, what are the pumping facilities in the office, a lot of them haven't actually been able to tell me, which I think is probably quite a good indication that most people don't do it, whereas I intend to be sort of fairly open [...] I'm still breastfeeding [son], that means I'm gonna have to make sure that I have breaks at this time of day, this time of day, and this time of day, you know, and those are just set in stone. And hopefully by, you know, someone in my position being quite open about that, that will help normalise it for other women in the future.

**Ellie, Role-reversed mother**

In the absence of proactive cultures, normalising breastfeeding in workplaces is challenging even for those who would like to be role models. Breadwinning mother Lucy's decision to take longer Maternity Leave was shaped by wanting to breastfeed for as long as possible and feeling that it was not feasible to breastfeed at work. There is no awareness or discussion about breastfeeding in her workplace and she has never known of anyone breastfeeding. In her partner Will's workplace there are breastfeeding rooms, but they are poorly advertised so people do not always know they are available and sometimes they are even locked. Equal sharing mother Sarah also felt she had faced discrimination for using a breast pump at work, despite this being a legal entitlement.

## Navigating the realities of workplace policies: (un)supportive managers

Parents' experiences of workplaces are too often dependent on individualised factors rather than on clear workplace structures, policies, and underpinning family-friendly cultures. Employees are sometimes made responsible for knowing policies exist, understanding their meaning, and for asserting their entitlement, which may restrict meaningful access to leave. A prominent theme across the interviews is that mothers and fathers must often rely on informally supportive managers and colleagues. Supportive managers can help to mitigate gaps in formal policies and facilitate more positive experiences for employees. For example, some parents felt able to take long parenting leave, to work flexibly where there was no clear workplace policy or formal arrangement or to fulfil parenting duties such as taking children to doctor's appointments, due to understanding managers. Others appreciated sympathetic colleagues who were willing to provide informal 'cover' when they needed time off due to childcare.

However, parents also suggested that even within a single organisation, some colleagues are much less understanding about caring responsibilities than others and this is sometimes difficult to navigate. The experience of managers as key gatekeepers to how workplace policies are implemented in practice was common across the interviews for both mothers and fathers. Jack, a primary breadwinning father, had been forced to rely on finding "understanding bosses" because organisational policies are

<sup>5</sup> There are some potential protections for breastfeeding mothers in current UK law, but statutory employment law "does not give a right to paid breastfeeding breaks, or other specific rights around arrangements which might be needed to facilitate breastfeeding (or expressing milk) during work" (<https://workingfamilies.org.uk/articles/returning-to-work-while-breastfeeding-a-guide-to-the-law/>)

not sufficiently visible/transparent. He worked full-time and had an informal arrangement ('good will on both sides') with his manager that he could sometimes work flexibly rather than during his fixed hours. In a previous role in a different department of the same organisation, Jack's request to change his working pattern to be more involved with childcare was denied. He moved to the new department as a result. A traditional father, Peter, had requested changes through Human Resources so that his shift pattern worked better for his family life. The request was successful only because Peter's manager had been happy to support it, and he felt that if he had to negotiate with his current manager, he 'wouldn't have as much luck'.

The role of managers in applying policies also came up in relation to fathers needing to be able to care for mothers with physical and mental health issues and take on additional childcare. For example, Lisa, an equal sharing mother, suffered from post-natal depression and ongoing chronic illness and her partner's supervisors were not supportive of the dependants' leave policy in practice, asking him to take annual leave instead. Vicky, a role-reversed mother, had postnatal depression after the birth of her second child. Her partner Edward's employer at the time would not allow him time away from work for childcare and to look after her, making things much harder for them:

“ I struggled, I had PND, postnatal depression, and it was really tough, but there's kind of like an expectation of yeah, when you have a newborn, it's tough, you just kind of, like, muck on and get on with it, and there was absolutely no kind of sense from [partner's] employer of maybe we should be more flexible and you should be able to have some time off.

**Vicky, Role-reversed mother**

In saying no to fathers' requests for accommodations, organisations and managers implicitly replicate the longstanding gendered assumption that workers are free from caring responsibilities, that there is a wife at home to look after the children.



## 4. Parents' Identities and Ideologies

## Are non-normative parenting arrangements enabled by underlying ideologies?

The findings suggest that equal sharing and role-reversing were enabled by parents' egalitarian gender ideologies and non-essentialist perceptions of men's and women's ability to nurture, as well as mothers' lower gatekeeping tendencies. Parents who reverse roles had the most egalitarian and non-essentialist views, followed by those who share equally. Mothers who reverse roles or share equally had a lower tendency for gatekeeping beliefs and behaviours than traditional mothers.

As expected, both male and female breadwinners and equal sharers had more central work-related identities than main caregivers. A more complex picture emerged regarding the psychological centrality of parental identities. Here, women in both breadwinning and caregiving roles had more central parental identity than their male counterparts: breadwinning mothers had more central parental identity than breadwinning fathers, and caregiving mothers had more central parental identity than caregiving fathers.

To learn about the unique social-psychological characteristics which enable parents to share childcare equally or reverse roles despite strong normative pressure, the survey respondents completed a series of psychological measures of their gender ideologies, essentialist perceptions of men and women, and the centrality of their parental and work-related identities. Women's tendency for maternal gatekeeping attitudes and behaviours was also measured. These attitudes and ideologies were then explored in the in-depth interviews, which provided further insight into the meanings parents attach to their family roles and the motivations behind the way they organise work and childcare.

### **Gender ideologies: Mothers expecting a 50/50 split**

Gender ideologies refer to attitudes toward the appropriate roles of men and women in society. For example, those who endorse traditional gender ideologies believe that it is best for everyone if the man earns the living and the woman looks after the home and children, while those who endorse egalitarian ideologies believe that couples should share the housework and the responsibility for supporting the family financially.

The quantitative survey results showed that in each of the study groups, women had more egalitarian gender ideologies than men. In addition, gender ideologies differed between the three parenting arrangements, so that role-reversed couples had the most egalitarian ideologies (average score of 4.50 on a 1-5 scale) compared to equal sharers (average 4.28) and

couples who share roles traditionally (average 3.97). Notably, all three groups endorsed egalitarian gender ideologies overall, which indicates a discrepancy between ideologies and practice in couples who maintain a traditional division of roles. Previous qualitative research revealed how couples make sense of such discrepancies by explaining their division as resulting from inevitable, gender-neutral compromises in light of their current circumstances, overlooking the series of prior choices which created those circumstances and rendered a traditional division the most convenient or efficient (Daminger, 2020).

Evidence from the in-depth interviews confirmed the survey findings but also revealed complexities and contradictions in parents' narratives. Where the survey found that equal sharing and role-reversing are enabled by parents' egalitarian gender ideologies, the interview data showed what gender equality meant to couples.

Mothers in traditional arrangements considered themselves as having primary responsibility for their children and described their partners as 'helping' them with childcare or talked about feeling 'lucky' that their partners were involved with the children, rather than expecting this to happen.

In contrast, mothers in equal sharing and role-reversed arrangements felt that parents should have 50/50 responsibility for children. For these mothers, gender equality meant not being assigned specific tasks according to whether one was a mother or father. They

tended more to define gender equality in terms of interchangeability, where either the mother or father is able to complete a task or deliver care. As Kirsty explained:

“ I’m not lucky to have him who does things. Like that’s what he should be doing and we should be sharing it. And but that’s often a language that we use isn’t it. It’s like, **‘oh you’re so lucky to have a husband who cooks dinner occasionally’. Like ‘no [laughs] no more than he’s lucky to have a wife who cooks dinner occasionally’, you know.**

**Kirsty, Equal sharing mother, our emphasis**

The traditional and equal sharing fathers were more likely to describe equality as playing to one’s strengths, which were based on personality rather than gender. This ‘equal but different’ narrative explains divisions of labour which are based on individuals’ purportedly ‘natural’ abilities, such as fathers assuming responsibility for household maintenance tasks, and mothers overseeing the organisation of children’s healthcare. Nonetheless, these divisions of labour often appeared gendered. Fathers in role-reversed arrangements were just as likely to describe equality as involving a 50/50 split in responsibilities as involving playing to one’s personal strengths.

While equal sharing mothers were likely to present their family arrangements in ideological terms, equal sharing fathers often talked about the barriers which interfered with their aim to share equally, such as loss of wages during periods of parenting leave or childcare costs. Similarly, the caregiving fathers were supportive of their partner’s career ambitions but did not overtly stress the importance of women achieving gender equality *per se*, or link gender equality to their own arrangements.

Couples in all categories believed their arrangements were fairly equal, regardless of their particular division of work and childcare. Even fathers and mothers who were identified in this study as the main breadwinners perceived themselves to be sharing housework and childcare equally with their partners.

Couples across all categories, including those in traditional arrangements, compared themselves to their peers. Equal sharing couples described themselves as more equal than their peers or

being influenced by other equal sharing couples they knew. Those couples pursuing gender equality tended to represent themselves as role models, trailblazers or influencers; this was especially apparent among breadwinning and equal sharing mothers and caregiving fathers.

“ I mentor quite a lot of women who are younger than me. And they quite often will say that they really appreciate seeing a model working where my, you know, I’m able to pursue my career and that my husband has found something that he wants to do and that that works. And, you know, I’m able to do it without the children always being in after school clubs and things like that. And that there is a, that there is a way and everything doesn’t have to stop when you have children.

**Kirsty, Equal sharing mother**

Making comparisons with their own parents was common among all couple categories. Equal sharing and breadwinning mothers often described their parents – and particularly their mothers – as role models who had inspired them to pursue gender equality in their household and parenting arrangements.

Strikingly, many of the equal sharing, breadwinning and caregiving fathers talked about wanting to do things differently from their own fathers. These men drew upon their own experiences as children in (neo) traditional families when they explained their own approaches to parenting. Doing things differently involved having more equal sharing relationships with their own partners and being present, ‘hands on’ types of dads.

The desire to be a role model to their own children was rarely cited as a motivating factor for their parenting arrangement, however, Lucy, a role-reversed mother, commented that her husband provides ‘a good male role model for [son] because I would like [son] to feel like he doesn’t need to kind of relentlessly pursue career and money and that kind of thing, [...] and so I think Will got a nice balance in that respect.’ Similarly, Kevin, an equal sharing father, explained that it was important for him that his daughter ‘knows that she doesn’t have to... expect to give up a job or something if she decides to have kids when she’s older.’



The interview data suggest that gender inequality at a macro-level was a concern for equal sharers and role-reversed couples, whereas traditional couples tended to frame gender inequality as a private concern of individual families rather than an issue for wider society at large. Inequality was identified as being damaging to men by both mothers and fathers. For example, equal sharing fathers and mothers and caregiving fathers framed gender inequality as damaging to men because it inhibited their involvement in their children's lives which was to the detriment of those fathers and society generally.

Although the interviewees identified gender inequality in wider society and recognised a need for change, they did not necessarily relate this to their own experiences. For example, equal sharers and role-reversed couples were likely to see themselves as exceptions, struggling alone or as doing what was 'best for them' as a family rather than being part of a wider change movement.

### **Rejecting essentialist beliefs about men's and women's ability to care for children**

Individuals who hold essentialist perceptions of gender tend to view men and women as inherently different in their predisposition to parenthood (Gaunt, 2006). For example, essentialism includes the belief that mothers are instinctively better caretakers than fathers, and that fathers must learn what mothers are able to do naturally in terms of childcare. The quantitative survey findings regarding the respondents' essentialist views showed a similar pattern to that of gender ideologies. Specifically, individuals who reverse roles expressed the lowest level of biological essentialism (average score of 2.21 on a 1-5 scale) compared to equal sharers and couples who share roles traditionally (2.48 and 2.88 respectively).

The participants in the interviews rejected essentialist views of men's and women's ability to nurture. As Jim, an equal sharing father, described: 'it's less about just fundamental differences and more about practice and exposure to it.' Equal sharers and role-reversed couples in particular emphasised the role of socialisation in shaping how mothers and fathers cared for their children and consistently stressed that there were no innate differences. The one exception mentioned was mothers' ability to breastfeed:

“ So yeah, women can breastfeed, and obviously, you know, they support children during pregnancy, so that's a very specific female role, but once you're outside of that first, you know, that first phase where kids need breastfeeding, I don't think there's any real difference between what men and women can do as parents.

**Ben, Equal sharing father**

### **Consciously avoiding maternal gatekeeping**

In the context of cohabiting or married different-gender couples, maternal gatekeeping refers to a collection of beliefs and behaviours that limit fathers' opportunities to experience childcare and housework and develop the relevant skills, ultimately inhibiting shared responsibility for family work (Allen & Hawkins, 1999; Gaunt, 2008). It is particularly evident when mothers act as managers by organising and scheduling the engagement of fathers, or when they supervise the fathers, set high standards, and criticise the quality of their housework and childcare. To examine group differences in these tendencies, female survey respondents completed a measure of maternal gatekeeping (Gaunt, 2008).

Overall, the survey results showed significantly greater gatekeeping tendencies in women in traditional arrangements (average 2.25 on a 1-4 scale) compared to equal sharers and women in role-reversed arrangements (1.84 and 1.81 respectively). When examining group differences in sub-dimensions of maternal gatekeeping, differences were particularly notable in the domain of standards and responsibilities (e.g. 'My husband doesn't really know how to take care of our child (feeding, bathing etc.) so it's just easier if I do these things') and beliefs about the differentiated family roles (e.g. 'Most women enjoy caring for their homes, and men just don't like that stuff').

In the in-depth interviews, mothers sometimes showed awareness of gatekeeping tendencies and described their conscious efforts to avoid them. Jenny, a primary caregiving mother, was bothered by her female friends' gatekeeping behaviours as she noticed how their motivation to maintain control hindered the fathers' ability to share childcare:

“ And I think sometimes, as women, we don't always...allow our children's fathers the time to kind of find their way of doing things. Again, I've seen it a lot with some of my baby friends who wouldn't let their husbands change the nappies, cause they didn't do it right, and I pointed out to them, no, they are doing it right, they will do it right, they can look after this child, they are as invested in this child as you are, it will just be different. And we don't always give them the time to find their own ways of working. Yeah, and maybe sometimes as women, we want a bit more control, **you have to do it the way I've told you to, and if you don't do it exactly the way I've told you to, then I'll just do it myself.**

**Jenny, Traditional mother, our emphasis**

A couple of equal sharing mothers pointed to the role of Maternity Leave in giving them a knowledge advantage over their partners, and were conscious about passing this knowledge on to their partners without undermining the fathers' competence as caregivers:

“ You just know that inside out and the other person doesn't. So then you start telling isn't it, “oh now he needs a sleep at ten and he needs a sleep at two”, and stuff. And then I was always worried that it comes across as a little bit like overpowering or something. But at the same time it just makes it easy isn't it. Why does he have to discover it for himself when I've obviously spent weeks now experiencing this routine.

**Liz, Equal sharing mother**

Another equal sharing mother concluded:

“ ...if we wanted them to do it then we have to sort of take a step back and allow things maybe to go a bit wrong for a little while whilst they work out what's going on and accept that they might do it differently.

**Kirsty, Equal sharing mother**

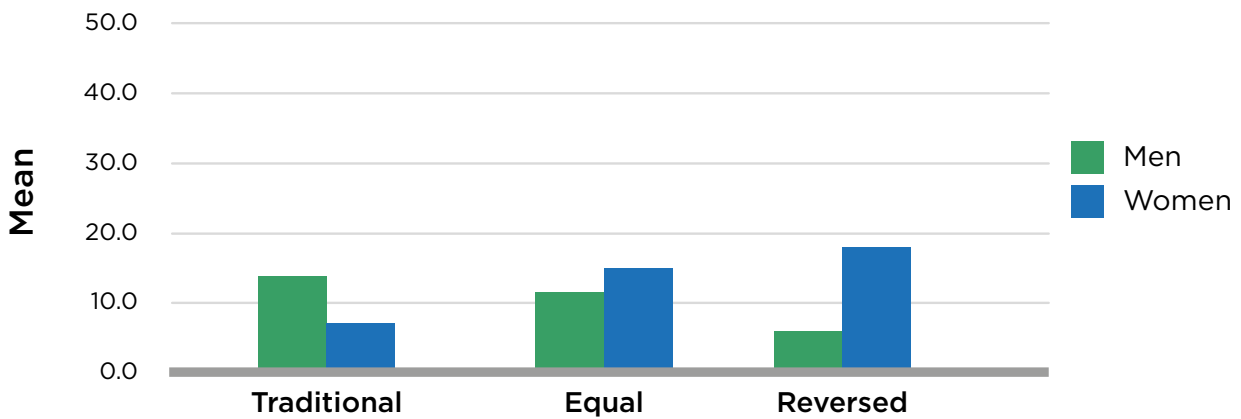
## **The centrality of parental and work-related identities**

The psychological centrality of the respondents' parental and work-related identities was measured in the quantitative survey to examine how it varies by gender and family role. Psychological centrality of an identity is the extent to which the person identifies with it or perceives it as an important part of who they are. The respondents were asked to distribute 100% between eight identities (friend, sibling, wife/husband/partner, work, son/daughter, parent, national identity, religious identity) and had the option to add other identities to the list (Gaunt & Scott, 2014).

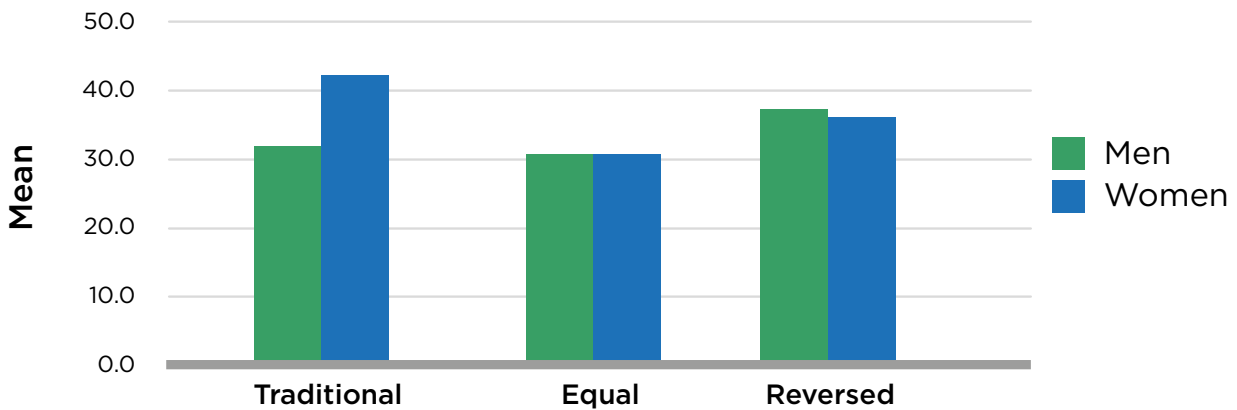
The survey results showed significant differences between the groups (see Figures 10-11). Unsurprisingly, male and female breadwinners had more central work identities than male and female caregivers and equal sharers. Notably, women in role-reversed arrangements had more central work-related identity than all others.

An interesting picture emerged when comparing the centrality of parental identity between traditional and role-reversed couples. While traditional caregiving mothers had a significantly more central parental identity (average 41.77) than traditional breadwinning fathers (average 31.29), role-reversed caregiving fathers and breadwinning mothers had similarly central parental identities (average 36.51 and 36.61 respectively). In other words, there was a significant interaction between family role and gender, in which caregiving mothers had more central parental identity than caregiving fathers, and breadwinning mothers had more central parental identity than breadwinning fathers.

### Work identity centrality



### Parental identity centrality



Figures 10-11: The centrality of work and parental identities

Data from the in-depth interviews confirmed these patterns of findings about women having both stronger work-related identities and stronger parental identities compared to men in the same roles. Paid work was central to mothers' sense of self-identity, particularly among equal sharers and breadwinners. For example, Lucy, a breadwinning mother, explained that 'my career's always been, not my number one priority, but it's my happiness and my identity' and that 'as much as it's a tough career, I do feel quite miserable if I'm not able to do it, cause it feels a big part of who I am.'

In line with previous qualitative studies (e.g. Deutsch & Gaunt, 2020), equal sharers and role-reversed couples often highlighted the mothers were motivated by work, and that the work itself, as well as financial independence and security were important for them. When on Maternity Leave, mothers (unlike fathers) sometimes felt as if they were seen by others

as mothers only, and this motivated them to go back to work in order to regain a sense of their own identities. Luke, an equal sharing father, described how his partner 'was really keen to go back to work because she got sick of being described as Lily the mum, and [...] she wanted to reclaim that identity that she once felt she had as being Lily the worker, Lily the nurse.'

At the same time, some fathers seemed to be less motivated by work itself and saw work primarily as a source of income. The primary caregiving fathers in particular were sometimes described as being unambitious and homebodies by themselves and their partners. For example, Joshua, a main caregiver, commented that 'I don't really like working to be honest [laughs]' and Jason, another main caregiver, similarly explained that 'since I started working I've been looking forward to the day where I don't have to work anymore. I just see it as a huge inconvenience to living my life [laughs].'

In line with the mothers' stronger work identities, equal sharers and role-reversed couples often prioritised the mother's career. Couples who reversed roles often explicitly mentioned the mother's stronger attachment to her work as one of motivations which led to their arrangement:

“ The whole idea behind me quitting and her continuing, obviously for starters, she loves her work. I enjoyed my work and got a lot of satisfaction out of it, but it wasn't... she needs her work to stay sane frankly.

**Liam, Role-reversed father**

Nevertheless, the mothers' paid work existed in tension with their anxieties about being a 'good mum'. Being a 'good mum' was defined by mothers in all categories as taking Maternity Leave, spending quality time with children and being present in their day to day lives, which was particularly challenging for breadwinning mothers of babies and younger children who went to bed in the early evening. In contrast, breadwinning fathers did not express a similar anxiety about being a 'good dad'; indeed, normative ideas about 'good fathers' were not explicitly discussed to the same extent.



## **5. Consequences for Parents' Wellbeing and Satisfaction**

Compared with traditional and role-reversed couples, equal sharers were more satisfied with their division of responsibilities, tended more to perceive their division as resulting from their conscious choice (both personally and as a couple), did not wish to change their own or their partner's work hours, and did not want their division to change in the next year.

Female breadwinners in role-reversed arrangements were the least satisfied with the division of roles, and together with breadwinning fathers, they felt more than others that they had been forced into their role. Both them and their husbands wished the breadwinning mothers could work less and the caregiving fathers could work more. Breadwinning mothers were also the most likely among the study groups to want the division to change in the next year, wishing to reduce their work hours and increase their partners' work hours.

## **Satisfaction with the division of roles and desire for change**

The survey respondents were asked how satisfied they were with their current division of responsibilities. Figure 12 shows that overall, equal sharers were significantly more satisfied with their division (average 4.06 on a 1-5 scale) than traditional and role-reversed couples (both average 3.60). However, there was a significant interaction between gender and arrangement, so that female equal sharers were more satisfied than all other groups (83% satisfied or very satisfied), while female breadwinners were the least satisfied (only 52%). In addition, male equal sharers and main caregivers were equally satisfied with the division (68% and 71%), and both were more satisfied than the male breadwinners (62%).

To better understand the respondents' satisfaction with their division of family roles, the survey respondents were asked to imagine that they could choose to work longer or shorter hours (and earn more or less accordingly). They also indicated whether they would want their partner to work more or less (and earn accordingly).

As can be seen in Figures 13-14, more role-reversed couples desired change than any other group. Both men and women in role-reversed arrangements wished the breadwinning mother could work less (40% of the men and 57% of the women) and the caregiving father could work more (58% and 63% respectively). Equal sharers tended to be happy with their current work hours, with 51%-65% reporting that they would not wish to change their own or their partner's work hours. Finally, both men and women in traditional arrangements wished the caregiving mother could work for pay more (47% and 43% for men and women respectively).

## Satisfaction with the division of roles

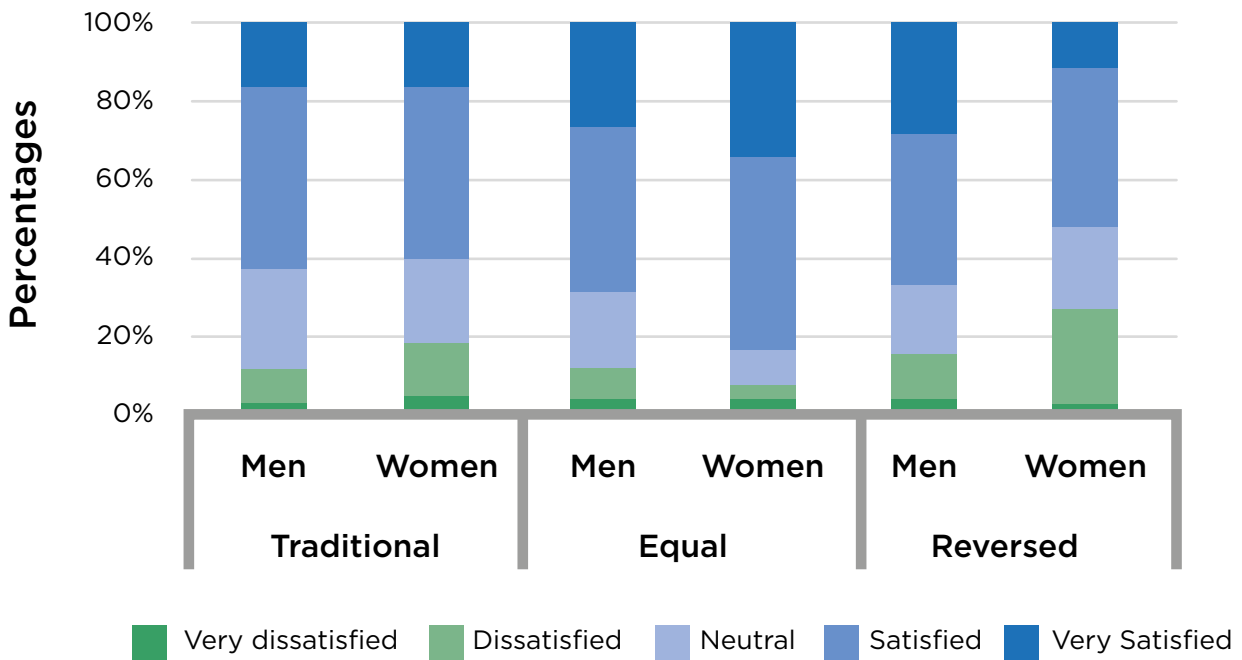


Figure 12: Overall, how satisfied, if at all, are you with the current division of responsibilities in your family? Responses were given on a scale from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 5 (very satisfied).

## I wish I could work more/less

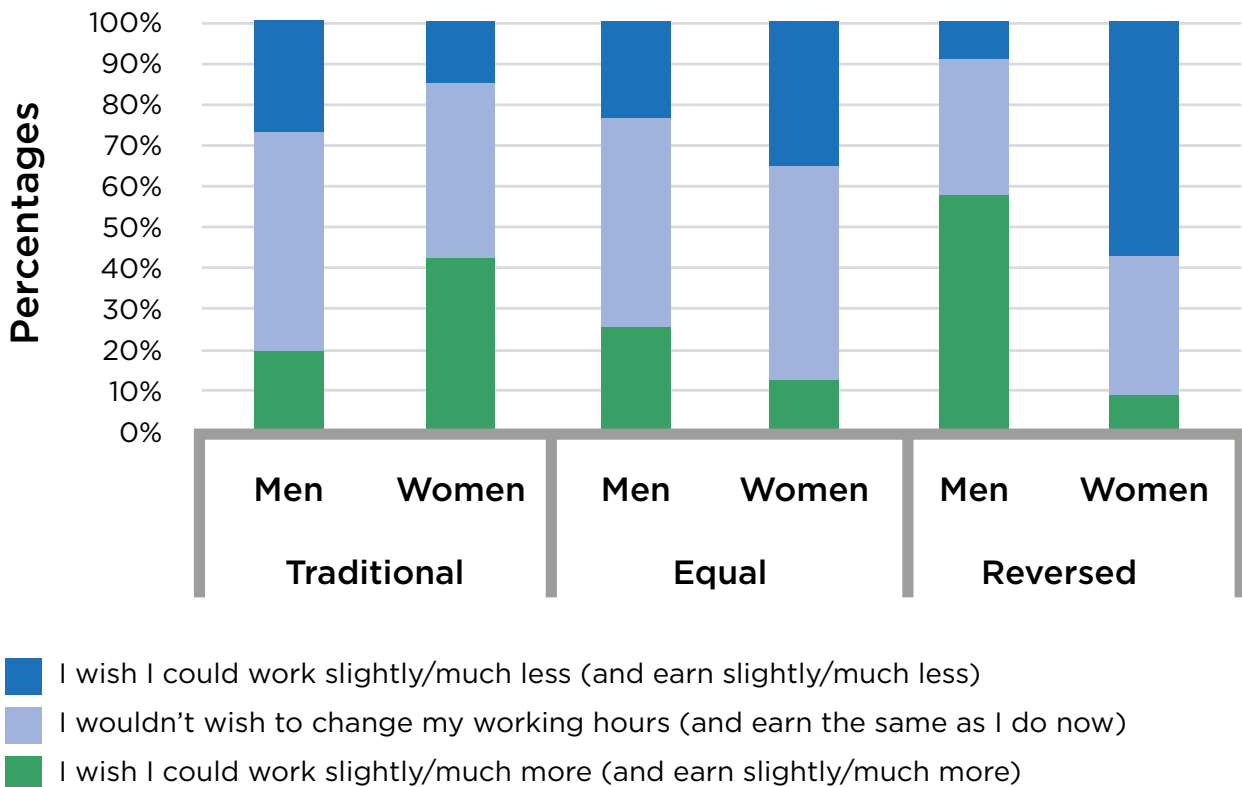
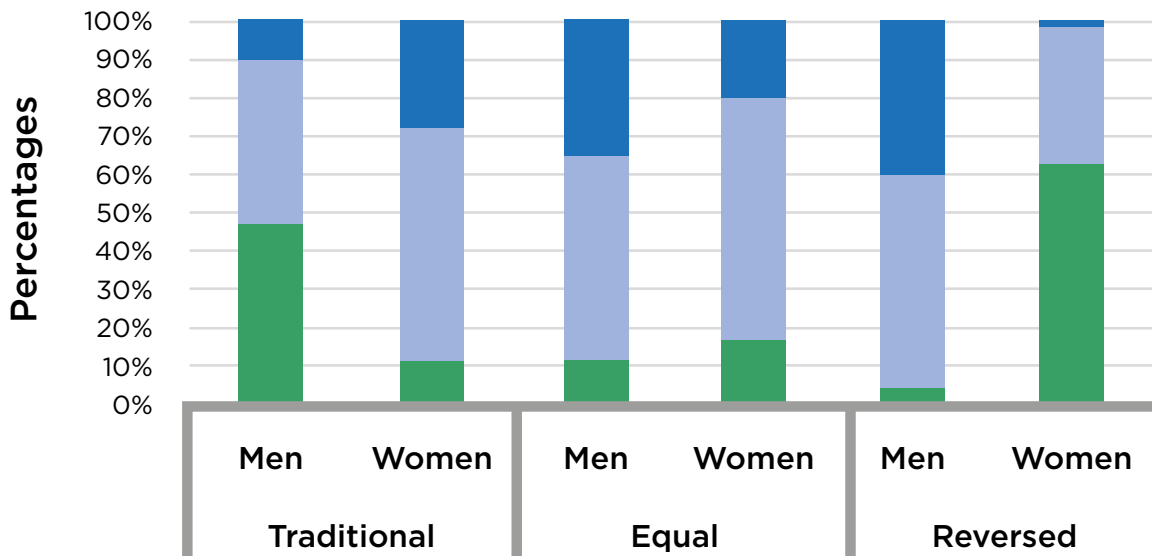


Figure 13: If you could work longer or shorter hours (and earn more or less), would you want to? Responses were given on a scale from 1 (I wish I could work much more (and earn much more)) through 3 (I wouldn't wish to change my working hours) to 5 (I wish I could work much less (and earn much less)).

## I wish my partner could work more/less



- I wish my partner could work slightly/much less (and earn slightly/much less)
- I wouldn't wish to change my partner's working hours (and earn the same as they do now)
- I wish my partner could work slightly/much more (and earn slightly/much more)

Figure 14: If your partner could work longer or shorter hours (and earn more or less), would you want him/ her to? Responses were given on a scale from 1 (I wish my partner could work much more (and earn much more)) to 5 (I wish my partner could work much less (and earn much less)).

Finally, the survey respondents were asked whether they would like their division of responsibilities to change in the next year. Figure 15 shows a significant difference between the groups, indicating that equal sharers were least likely to want their division to change. 75% of the women and 70% of the men who were sharing work and childcare equally said they would not like their division to change, significantly more than the women (46%-53%) and the men (58%) in the other arrangements.

Reflecting the survey data, most equal sharing couples declared in the in-depth interviews that they were satisfied with their division of roles and duties. Still, a few breadwinning and equal sharing mothers reported frustrations over doing more housework and, particularly, higher mental workload which often remained an area of inequality.

In line with the relatively lower satisfaction levels found in the survey data among traditional couples, interviewees in this group, while not explicitly dissatisfied, also did not seem to be particularly satisfied with their arrangements. The language they used suggested they have accepted the situation ('It is what it is', explained John, a traditional father) and did not or could not do anything to change it:

“ I tend not to try...try and find solutions...anymore because I don't think there is any [laughs], anything anymore I can do.

**Karen, Traditional mother**



## Would you like this division to change in the next year?

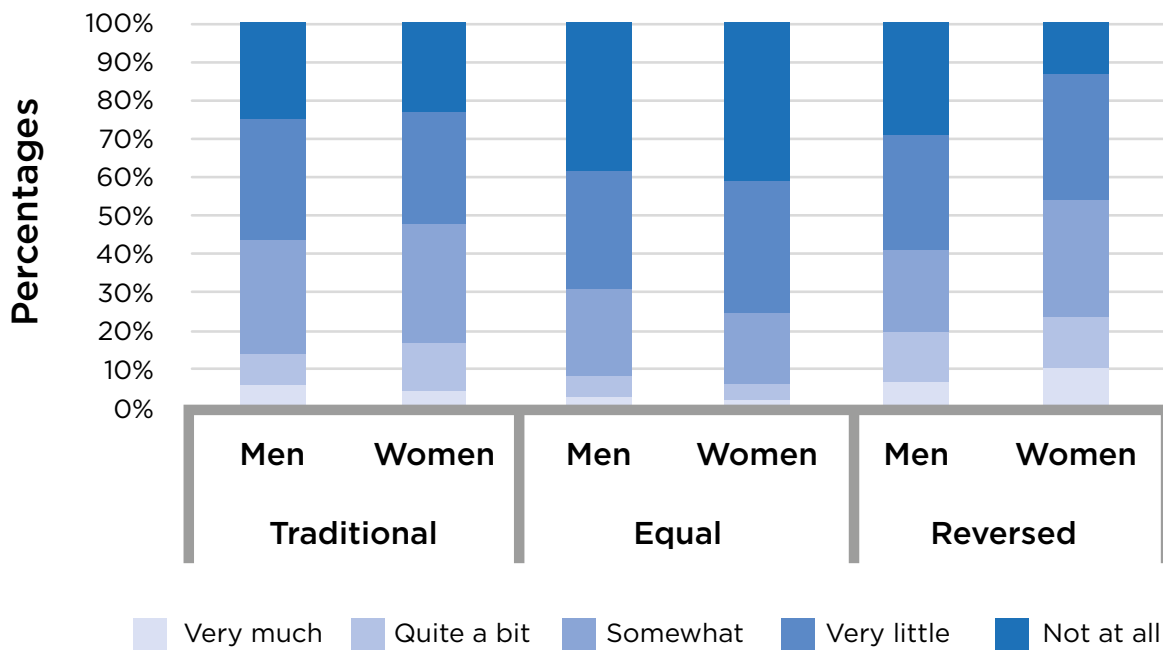


Figure 15: To what extent, if at all, would you like this division to change in the next year? Responses were given on a scale from 1 (very much) to 5 (not at all).

Primary caregiving mothers tended to prioritise their childcare responsibilities over their paid work. Some seemed to have accepted the status quo and did not express much overt dissatisfaction with their arrangements. Others mentioned being frustrated and resentful that they had to be flexible and sacrifice their work, but at the same time accepted that children were the priority:

“ I have worked very hard to get where I am. I worry that only being there two days a week means that I’m gonna miss out on opportunities potentially. So...yes, I do wish it could be different but...on the other foot [son] is more important. So, we have to do what’s right for us and what’s right for him and that’s just how it works out.

**Christine, Traditional mother**

A similar sentiment was sometimes expressed by primary caregiving fathers, such as Liam, who talked about how much he missed his old career:

“ As I say, that’s...I got a lot of satisfaction out of being good at my job. At very least, I felt I was, but I, yeah, that’s where I got a lot of my self-worth from, you know.

At the same time, he reminded himself that:

“ That’s probably the best way... that’s why I quit my job, full-stop, it’s why I came off. So as far as I’m concerned, my main priority is [son], cause...you know, even if I didn’t feel fully like oh, [son] is my world, kind of thing, he’s still my responsibility and my primary responsibility.

**Liam, Role-reversed father**

## Perceived choice and institutional constraints

The survey respondents were asked to what extent they thought their division reflected their own personal choices and to what extent they felt they were forced into it (see Figure 16). They were also asked to what extent they thought this division reflected their choice as a couple or whether they felt they were forced into it.

A similar pattern of results was obtained for both perceived personal choice and perceived choice as a couple. In both cases, female equal sharers had the highest subjective perception of choice (57% felt they chose their division, and under 9% felt they were forced into it). Male breadwinners had significantly lower subjective perception of choice compared to male equal sharers and caregivers, and female breadwinners had significantly lower subjective perception of choice compared to female equal sharers. In other words, male and female breadwinners perceived the least choice, personally and as a couple.

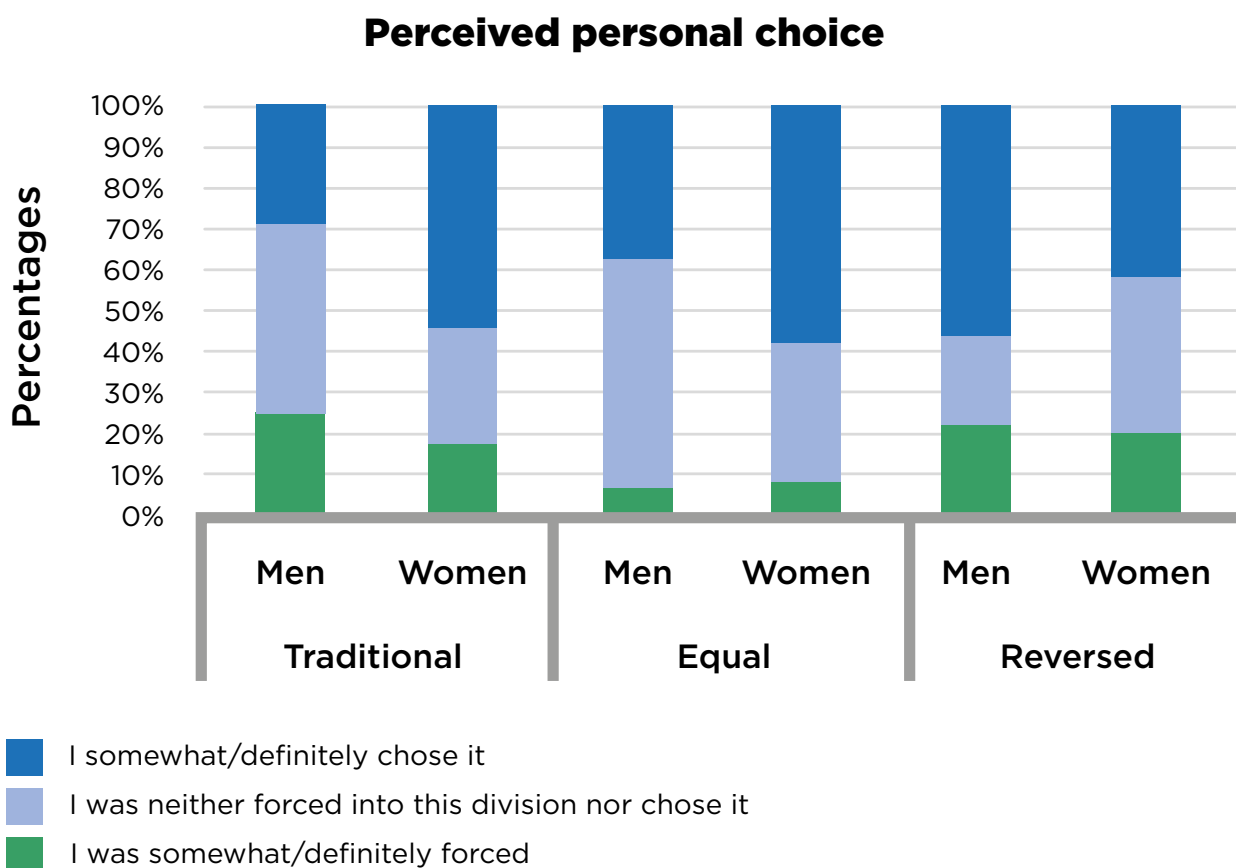


Figure 16: To what extent do you think that this division reflects your own choices and to what extent do you feel you were forced into it? Responses were given on a scale from 1 (I was definitely forced into this division) to 5 (I definitely chose this division).

In the in-depth interviews, breadwinning fathers talked about the lack of choice which they felt had driven them into their role, often speaking in fatalistic terms about men's inability to take time out of paid work to care for their children. Some of them talked about the inevitability of their role by treating caregiving fathers as a joke and not a

serious option. They also expressed a perceived lack of choice as they described having to miss out on family time because of their working hours. In some cases, this caused distress, for example when missing their children meeting developmental milestones.

In line with the survey data, caregiving fathers tended more to view their arrangement as resulting from a conscious choice. These fathers were often motivated to reduce their work hours or quit work altogether in order to spend more time with children, sometimes wishing to avoid pre-school childcare provisions or limit them to 2-3 days a week.

“ It was just before [daughter] was born, I told my work that I would like to work two less days so I could look after the kid more because **I didn't see any point of having a child if you're not gonna see the child or look after it or anything.**

**Jason, Role-reversed father, our emphasis**

The choice was often also motivated by the mothers' greater attachment to work and/or higher earnings and ranged from fathers who disliked their jobs and were happy to quit to those who liked their jobs but felt alright about giving them up, to those who really missed their jobs and sacrificed work for the sake of their family.

Primary caregiving fathers appreciated the bond with their children, found childcare fulfilling and suggested they were happy about the opportunity to do it. Joshua, a role-reversed father, described his role as, 'something like which is really rewarding and helping children develop, I just feel really lucky to be able to do it and I really enjoy it.'

Some caregiving fathers also talked about being pushed into their circumstances through economics, for example, not being able to earn as much as their partners due to unemployment or difficulties finding work.

Both breadwinning and caregiving mothers described feeling forced to choose between working or spending time with children. Confirming the quantitative findings, a few breadwinning mothers mentioned they would welcome the opportunity to work part-time either to be more involved in childcare, or to have more headspace and time for themselves to protect their wellbeing. Yet, this was often infeasible or impractical for financial reasons or, if possible, done with a view to maintain the happiness of the whole family:

“ [...] as much as I found it very hard being away from work in terms of my identity, I think taking that step away has made me realise there's far more to life than, you know, work, and it was damaging to my health and my wellbeing to work the intensity that I was working, and I've, you know, plenty of my colleagues have become extremely ill or suicidal [...] And it's not necessarily been to spend more time with [son]. I don't mean it in that's not my sole reason, the main reason is because I want to be happy and healthy for my family. And I don't want to sacrifice that, and I'd rather take a pay cut to have a happier and healthier life.

**Lucy, Role-reversed mother**

In line with the survey data, most equal sharers perceived their work and parenting arrangement as resulting from their own choice, sometimes carefully planned well ahead. Jim recalled:

“ No it was conscious, definitely conscious. **We had talked about it even, even before, like long before Lisa was pregnant** we were talking about how we would, how we would like to...approach parenting. **And we always wanted it to be split as evenly as possible.** We were kinda lucky in our circumstances in that, so and parental leave was a big part a' that. I knew from, from the start that I wanted to take a period of leave.

**Jim, Equal sharing father, our emphasis**

Equal sharing couples often described how their decision to share equally 'was a choice we sort of had to fight for in some ways', as Grace explained. These couples viewed their workplaces as preventing the outworking of their gender equality ideologies in practice and constraining their choices.

“ It’s been our choice to do it and we have, and, you know, I’m happy to have done it. I would say it’s been made more difficult by circumstances. I’ve had to, I’ve had to overcome obstacles in order to do it.

**Ben, Equal sharing father**

A minority of equal sharers described supportive workplaces or childcare providers; however, they were the exception rather than the norm:

“ I feel fairly empowered with my work to say, “I need to take an afternoon with him cause he’s not well” or, “I need to go to this doctor’s appointment with him”. I don’t know that all dads would.

**Jim, Equal sharing father**

Interestingly, the role-reversed couples did not comment on workplace cultures as helping or hindering the implementation of their gender equality ideologies to the same degree as the equal sharing couples. This might be because the role-reversed couples had worked within existing structures by swapping roles traditionally associated with mothers as caregivers and fathers as breadwinners. In addition, fathers in role-reversed couples tended to do less paid work than mothers in traditional couples, so may have experienced less conflict between childcare responsibilities and institutional cultures.

## Relationship quality, wellbeing, life satisfaction and self-esteem

While there were no significant differences in wellbeing between men in the three groups, mothers in traditional arrangements scored lowest on almost all wellbeing measures. They reported lower relationship quality and positive mood/emotions than both female breadwinners and equal sharers and had lower relationship satisfaction and life satisfaction than equal sharers.

As for self-esteem, both men and women who were the primary caregivers had lower self-esteem than equal sharers and breadwinners, suggesting that care work is undervalued while paid work provides an important source of self-esteem.

To assess the psychological outcomes of different divisions of roles, the survey respondents completed a number of well-validated psychological scales which measured the quality of their couple relationship, relationship satisfaction, overall wellbeing, life satisfaction and self-esteem.

Parenting arrangement had a significant effect on couple relationship quality. In line with previous findings on the positive effect of men’s involvement in childcare (Carlson, 2022), the results in Figure 17 show that traditional couples had a lower relationship quality than equal sharers and role-reversed couples. This effect was driven by the lower relationship quality reported by women in traditional arrangements (average 3.64 on a 1-5 scale) compared to equal sharers and female breadwinners (4.09 and 3.81 respectively), while men’s reported relationship quality was similar across the three groups. A similar pattern of results was found for couple relationship satisfaction.

## Relationship quality

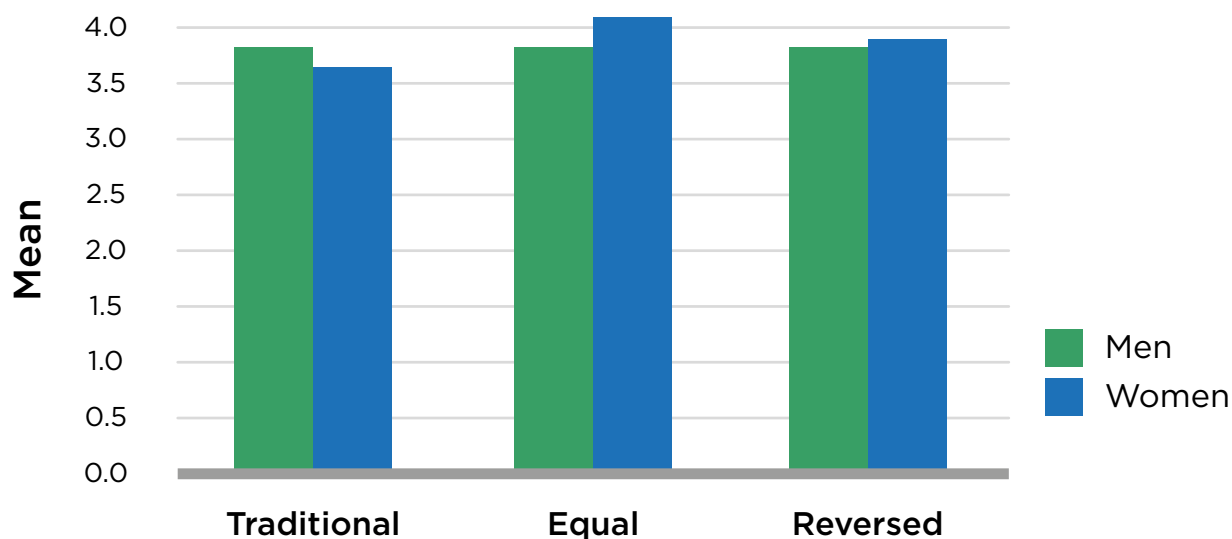


Figure 17: Relationship quality scale (ENRICH, Fowers & Olson, 1993). Scores ranged from 1 (low quality) to 5 (high quality).

Other psychological measures similarly suggest less positive outcomes for women in traditional arrangements. Specifically, women in traditional arrangements had significantly lower positive mood and emotions over the past two weeks (average 3.15 on a 1-5 scale) compared to equal sharers and female breadwinners (3.39 and 3.30 respectively). Their self-esteem (average 2.85

on a 1-4 scale) was lower than the self-esteem of both equal sharers and female breadwinners (3.01 and 3.07) (see Figure 18), and their overall life satisfaction (average 5.13 on a 1-7 scale) was lower than that of equal sharers (average 5.60) (see Figure 19).

## Self esteem

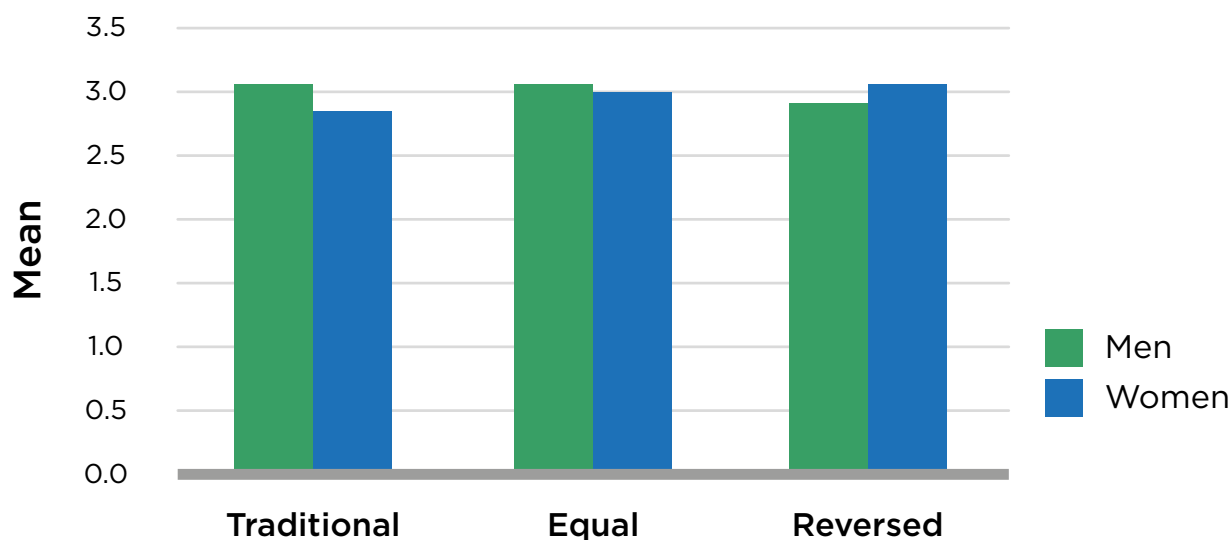


Figure 18: Self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965). Scores range from 1 (low self-esteem) to 4 (high self-esteem).

## Life satisfaction

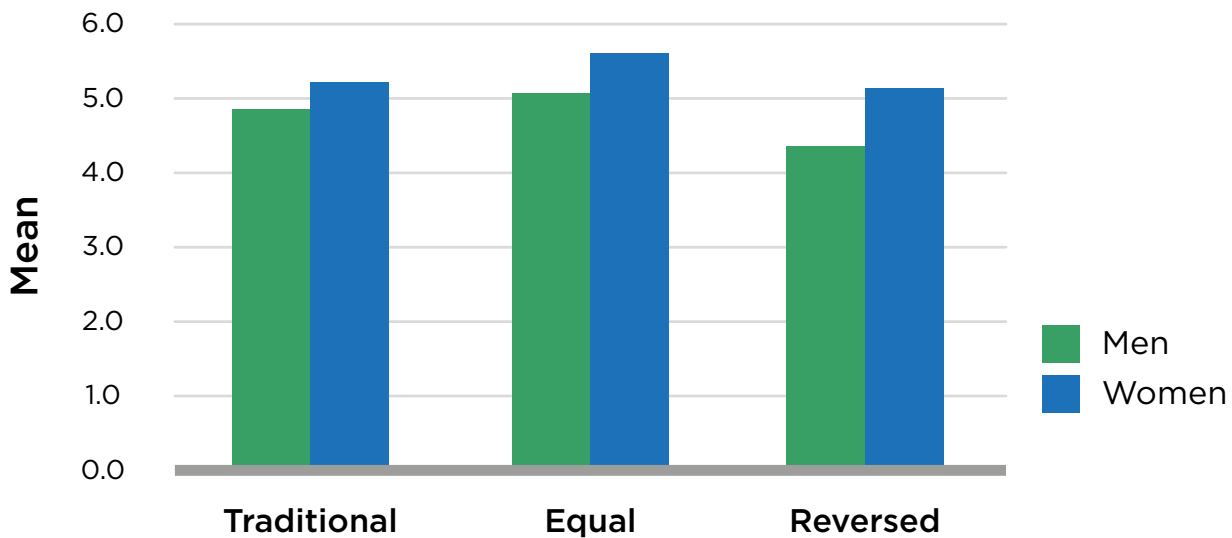


Figure 19: Life satisfaction scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985). Scores ranged from 1 (low satisfaction) to 7 (high satisfaction)

Interestingly, male and female caregivers had similar levels of self-esteem (average 2.86 on a 1-4 scale), which were lower than that of the equal sharers and breadwinners (average 3.00). This might reflect the lower status attached to care work while paid work and income form an important source of self-esteem.

The survey data indicated that women in traditional arrangements had lower relationship quality compared to equal sharers and breadwinners. However, when participants in the in-depth interviews were asked directly about conflicts over sharing responsibilities, most declared they did not have any. The language couples used when speaking about conflict downplayed any current issues as 'disagreements', 'nothing major/massive', 'occasional frustrations', 'not regular' occurring usually when one or both partners were tired or stressed. Some suggested they had argued in the past but not anymore, creating an image of well-aligned partners in a harmonious relationship. The only exception was one traditional couple where the mother said they had lots of conflicts. Her partner claimed they did not have conflicts anymore because they had 'organically assumed roles'. In traditional couples, mothers seemed somewhat more likely to report disagreements while fathers did not notice anything amiss.

Despite claiming they had no major disagreements, in all three categories, couples provided examples of conflicts, particularly when one partner or both felt they were doing more than the other or would like the other to do more. These were primarily about the breadwinners not being involved enough in childcare or housework, equal sharing fathers not doing enough of certain tasks such as cooking or cleaning, or fathers forgetting to do something.

Equal sharers attributed lack of conflict to knowing each other well and being good communicators. Understanding each other's needs, mutual support and adjustments over time were deemed to enable equal sharing and satisfactory arrangement.

“ I think we're also quite good communicators so if there's something that, like say I feel I'm doing too much or I feel that he's done more than me, we will both talk about that. [...] So I think because we have quite clear and open communication, I think it's fine cause even if we weren't happy with something we'd just change it. And we'd just talk about it.

**Abby, Equal sharing mother**

Another equal sharing mother, Lisa suggested that ‘the fact that we share it makes us closer a lot of the time’ because ‘there’s no sort of feeling of martyrdom or obligation, it’s just caring for each other and, and it being equal for each other.’

A few still reported feeling that their contribution was underestimated, or they were doing more than the other. Most often, equal sharers described conscious efforts to share responsibilities equally, which involved continuous monitoring of the allocation of tasks:

“ It kind of ebbs and flows and sometimes one of us has to pick up a bit more than the other, but I think that overall balance is kind of fair and we’re really, really conscious of that and **we’re constantly trying to work out, like, how is this fair, you know, is this fair, can we be any fairer.**

**Grace, Equal sharing mother, our emphasis**

Ben described how he assessed whether he was doing his fair share:

“ Like, my attitude with, with housework and childcare and all of these things is **if you think you’re doing too much, you’re probably doing the right amount**, because when you do, you see everything you do, [...] whether it’s picking up the fluff off the sofa or cleaning the entire kitchen and you have a record of everything you do, whereas you only ever see a fraction of what your partner does, [...] and so, you know, you compare your own knowledge of a day full of tiny tasks to the fraction of your partner’s day, and you obviously, it’s easy to conclude that you do more than that. So I would say unless, like, you know you’re slacking, it’s probably the case that you’re doing roughly the right amount.

**Ben, Equal sharing father, our emphasis**

All this suggests that equal sharing may require time, revisions and negotiations. In general, equal sharers and role-reversed couples seemed more likely to discuss their frustrations and sense of imbalance/inequality and attempt to resolve them.





## Conclusions

Considering the big picture emerging from our findings, the answer to the question in the sub-title is yes: some couples do transform gender in work and childcare. Most of the couples in the equal sharing group did divide childcare equally, and most of the fathers in the role-reversed group did carry the main responsibility for housework and childcare, similarly to mothers in traditional arrangements. Typically, both fathers and mothers who were the main caregivers performed all the childcare tasks during the day, while their partners shared the evening routine after work.

Considerations that led couples to reverse roles seem to mirror those taken by traditional couples: they were often motivated by the mothers' greater attachment to work and higher earnings, combined with a desire to avoid or limit the use of formal childcare provision and the fathers' desire to reduce their work hours or leave jobs entirely in order to spend more time with their children.

Equal sharing was typically motivated by couples' egalitarian ideologies, expecting a 50/50 split of housework and childcare. It was achieved through shorter work hours of both fathers and mothers, who each got to spend more time with their children as sole caregivers. In combination with greater reliance on non-parental care, these couples have achieved a more balanced division of work and childcare, which is clearly distinct from the male full-time/female part-time work pattern typical of current British families with young children.

For most couples, however, gendered state policies around Paternity and Maternity leave severely restricted their choices, steering them into a traditional division of childcare during the infant's first months. Fathers who otherwise shared childcare equally or were the main caregivers were only entitled to two weeks of statutory Paternity Leave, whereas mothers were paid to stay at home for 39 weeks. Shared Parental Leave was rarely seen as a viable option either because the couples were not entitled, could not afford the reduction in fathers' income, or the mothers did not wish to shorten their own leave. In addition, there was a lack of information and clarity about Shared Parental Leave in workplaces. Based on these findings, we recommend a shift in state policies towards equal parenting leave entitlement, including non-transferable 'use-it-or-lose-it' Parental Leave for fathers to facilitate meaningful choices for parents in how they share childcare and paid work. In addition, greater clarity about existing leave entitlements is needed in workplaces (see below).

Workplace policies and cultures were also important in facilitating or hindering couples' choices. Parents identified working from home, flexible hours, part-time hours and emphasis on output-based (rather than time-based) as helpful in managing work and childcare. However, they reported barriers to securing such work arrangements, especially for more desirable or senior roles. In addition, part-time and flexible hours were perceived as more normative for mothers than fathers, which meant that fathers felt they faced greater barriers to securing them, while mothers (especially in traditional arrangements) felt forced to arrange their work around their partner's less flexible job to facilitate childcare. In these ways, gendered norms around flexible and part-time jobs exacerbate inequalities in childcare arrangements, as well as impacting negatively on women's career prospects.

Overall, parents identified part-time and flexible working as important and appreciated flexibility where it was available (often more informally). However, our findings suggest that more needs to be done to normalise shorter and more flexible work hours for *both* mothers and fathers, and that government policies to more actively support these work arrangements would facilitate more equal sharing of childcare, as well as potentially helping to mitigate gendered inequalities in employment.

Our study also suggests that parents' experiences of workplaces are, in practice, often dependent on individualised factors such as supportive or unsupportive managers, and employees are sometimes made responsible for being aware of policies and asserting their entitlement. Employers can help to provide more consistently positive experiences for workers who are carers by improving clarity, knowledge and visibility around existing state and workplace specific policies and by encouraging family-friendly workplace cultures.

In addition to the lack of shorter hours and flexible work arrangements, the pressure on parents to identify a main caregiver and a main breadwinner is exacerbated by the lack of childcare alternatives. This is particularly difficult in early years as unaffordable formal childcare often means that one parent must stay at home until the child turns 3 years old and qualifies for (limited) free

provision. Our findings suggest that parents also find it difficult to juggle work commitments with childcare after school/nursery and during school holidays. To enable both parents to maintain their involvement in paid work, affordable, formal and high-quality childcare provision should be made available from the age of 6 months.

In terms of parents' wellbeing and satisfaction, there is no one-size-fits-all arrangement of work and childcare, but our findings revealed a few notable patterns. Equal sharers, and particularly women who shared equally, were the most satisfied with their arrangement. They were more likely than others to perceive their division as resulting from their conscious choices and did not wish to make any changes. In contrast, mothers in traditional arrangements had lower wellbeing, relationship quality and self-esteem, while both men and women who were the main breadwinners tended more than others to feel they had been forced into their role. Policies aimed at facilitating more equal sharing may therefore enable parents to make more meaningful choices in accordance with their preferences.

Taken together, our findings show that current gendered policies do not line up with parents' egalitarian aspirations and fathers' desire to be closely involved in their children's lives. The findings point to key policy changes that need to be implemented to support both fathers and mothers as caregivers, including shorter and more flexible work hours, equal leave entitlement to mothers and fathers, and high quality affordable childcare provision to enable both parents to return to work after parenting leave.

When asked about barriers for fathers in choosing how to arrange work and parenting, Mark, a traditional breadwinner, concluded:

“ It's the not seeing those examples around us. [...] there's like inertia there, I think, and that'll just take time, I suppose, it'll take time for more men to be in that situation, more men to see other men in that situation. [...] **It's just about creating the options, seeing the examples, having the experience**, and then it'll feel more natural and people will see it as less alien, I think.

**Mark, Traditional father,  
our emphasis**

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# Appendix 1: Quantitative Research Methodology<sup>6</sup>

## Sample

The quantitative data were generated using an online survey administered to members of the YouGov UK panel of 800,000+ individuals. Emails were sent to panellists selected at random from the base sample of the required profile. The responding sample was weighted to the profile of the sample definition to provide a representative reporting sample. Fieldwork was undertaken in February 2020.

The sample included 5,605 adults (2,805 men; 2,800 women) who were either married or living with a partner and had biological child/ren together, with at least one child aged 11 or under.

Of the full sample, only participants who met the criteria for inclusion in one of the three study groups were retained for further analysis. These were based on a combination of time distribution and task allocation measures. In each of these measures, we examined the gaps between the partners in order to identify participants who are primary caregivers, primary breadwinners, or sharing caregiving and breadwinning equally with their partners (see Table 1). The respondents' family role and gender were then used to classify them into one of the three categories.

Table 1. Criteria for Inclusion in the Three Study Groups

	Weekly work hours	Weekly childcare hours	Childcare tasks	% of family income
Primary caregiver	at least 7 fewer than partner	at least 7 more than partner	at least half	up to 40%
Primary breadwinner	at least 7 more than partner	at least 7 fewer than partner	up to half	at least 60%
Equal sharer	up to 5 hours difference between partners	up to 5 hours difference between partners	roughly half (average of 2.6 to 3.4 on a 1-5 scale)	roughly half (up to a 40/60 ratio)

Specifically, couples were identified as role-reversed if the father was the primary caregiver and the mother the primary breadwinner; that is, the father worked at least 7 hours per week less than the mother, provided at least 7 hours more of childcare, carried out at least half of the childcare tasks and contributed up to 40% of the family income. 2.3% of the sample met these criteria (3% of the men and 1.7% of the women). Inclusion criteria in the traditional group mirrored these, with the mother being the primary caregiver and the father the primary breadwinner. That meant that the mother worked at least 7 hours less than the father, provided at least 7 hours more of childcare, performed more childcare tasks than the father and contributed up to 40% of the family income.

37% of the sample met these criteria (34% of the men and 40% of the women).

Equal sharers were identified on the basis of up to 5 hours difference between partners in their work and childcare hours, carrying out approximately half of the childcare tasks and contributing approximately half of the family income (up to a 40/60 ratio). 5.5% of the sample met these criteria (7.6% of the men and 3.5% of the women).

To supplement the small sample size in the role-reversed group, additional respondents were recruited by a research assistant. The final sample included 2,813 participants (1,380 men, 1,433 women) of which 2,208

had a traditional arrangement (1010 men, 1198 women), 347 were equal sharers (226 men, 121 women) and 258 reversed roles (144 men, 114 women). The participants' socio-demographic characteristics can be found in Table 2. Most of the participants were married or in a civil partnership and lived in England. While the initial sample was fully representative, the selection of three subgroups introduced some small variations, so that the final sample had a slight overrepresentation of participants who identified as white (90% compared to 86% of the general population) or white British (84.1% compared to 80.5% of the population) and had a university degree (61% compared to 47% of the population) (Department for Education, 2021; Office for National Statistics, 2020). There were no significant differences between the three study groups in educational qualifications, ethnicity or region where they lived.

In terms of their income, there were no significant differences between fathers and mothers within the same role. That is, both fathers and mothers who were the main breadwinners earned on average a personal monthly income between £2,601 to £3,160; equal sharing fathers and mothers earned on average between £2,001 to £2,600 – lower than main breadwinners' incomes but as a family their income was higher.

Parents in traditional arrangements tended to be younger and have more children compared to parents in equal sharing and role-reversed arrangements (21.7% in the traditional group had 3 children or more, compared to 12.4% in equal sharing and 15.9% in role-reversed). In addition, the youngest child of equally sharing couples tended to be older ( $M = 5.00$ ) compared to traditional ( $M = 4.20$ ) and role-reversed couples ( $M = 3.70$ ). This might suggest that equal sharing is partly enabled by the youngest child starting school.

Table 2. The Demographic Characteristics of the Participants

	Traditional		Equal sharers		Role-reversed	
	Caregiving mother	Breadwinning father	Equal sharing mother	Equal sharing father	Breadwinning mother	Caregiving father
<b>Age of youngest child</b>						
≤ 11 months	14.5%	14.5%	7.4%	8.9%	13.1%	5.6%
1 year	15.8%	15.4%	14.9%	7.1%	26.3%	20.8%
2 years	11.6%	12.7%	8.3%	11.9%	15.9%	11.8%
3-5 years	23.5%	24.4%	30.6%	25.2%	30.7%	28.5%
6-11 years	34.6%	33.0%	38.8%	46.9%	14.0%	33.3%
<b>Number of children</b>						
1	28.7%	29.5%	41.3%	33.2%	45.6%	41.7%
2	48.5%	50.0%	44.6%	55.3%	41.2%	40.3%
3-5	22.5%	20.3%	14.1%	11.5%	13.2%	16.7%
6-9	0.3%	0.2%	0%	0%	0%	1.4%
<b>Age</b>						
18-24	0%	0.2%	1.0%	0%	0%	0%
25-34	26.2%	19.0%	23.2%	12.2%	33.3%	9.4%
35-44	57.5%	53.8%	55.6%	53.5%	50.0%	42.4%
45-54	16.0%	24.0%	20.2%	28.6%	16.7%	32.9%
55+	0.4%	2.9%	0%	5.6%	0%	15.3%

	Traditional		Equal sharers		Role-reversed	
	Caregiving mother	Breadwinning father	Equal sharing mother	Equal sharing father	Breadwinning mother	Caregiving father
<b>Education</b>						
Less than GCSE	5.9%	8.8%	7.3%	7.1%	2.7%	9.1%
GCSE	6.6%	6.3%	4.9%	7.1%	5.4%	9.1%
A-level	14.9%	10.1%	6.1%	9.8%	10.8%	7.8%
Higher education below degree level	10.7%	7.9%	2.4%	9.2%	13.5%	15.6%
BA/BSc	43.2%	43.9%	52.4%	37.0%	27.0%	33.8%
Higher degree	18.7%	23.1%	26.8%	29.9%	40.5%	24.7%
<b>Monthly personal income</b>						
≤ £590	30.8%	0.2%	1.7%	0.5%	0%	36.1%
£591 - £1,450	42.3%	5.8%	18.3%	15.2%	10.1%	20.3%
£1,451 - £2,600	17.7%	41.8%	40.9%	50.0%	37.6%	15.8%
£2,601 - £3,740	4.7%	31.0%	26.1%	21.2%	33.9%	13.5%
£3,741 - £4,300	1.4%	8.2%	6.1%	5.6%	7.3%	4.5%
≥ 4,300	3.1%	13.0%	7.0%	7.6%	11.0%	9.8%
<b>Ethnic Background</b>						
White	94.8%	93.3%	86.9%	95.1%	93.3%	93.8%
Mixed	1.3%	1.7%	3.1%	1.5%	0%	2.5%
Asian	3.0%	3.7%	4.2%	2.5%	6.7%	2.5%
Black	0.5%	1.0%	2.1%	1.0%	0%	0%
Any other ethnic group	0.5%	0.3%	1.0%	0%	0%	1.3%
<b>Region</b>						
England	82.7%	83.7%	79.8%	78.9%	85.4%	84.7%
Scotland	10.1%	10.3%	10.1%	11.7%	10.4%	14.1%
Wales	4.9%	4.2%	8.1%	7.0%	4.2%	1.2%
Northern Ireland	2.4%	1.8%	2.0%	2.3%	0%	0%

## Instruments

The participants were invited to complete an online survey on the ways in which families organise work and childcare. Its completion took 20 minutes on average.

The questionnaire consisted of well validated measures with the necessary adaptations for the current purposes. Measures of parents' *time investment and allocation of tasks* were adopted from Gaunt (2008). These included measures of everyday routines of the parents and children including time spent in childcare and paid work, as well as work arrangements (e.g. self-employment, shifts and work from home). The division of responsibilities was assessed using a "who-does-what?" measure of 24 housework and childcare tasks (Gaunt, 2008).

*Social psychological variables* were measured through existing validated scales of gender ideologies and essentialist perceptions (Gaunt, 2006), the salience and centrality of parental and

work-related identities (Gaunt & Scott, 2014), and maternal gatekeeping (Allen & Hawkins, 1999).

Participants' *wellbeing and life satisfaction* were evaluated using the satisfaction with life scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985), self-esteem scale (Rosenberg, 1965), the positive and negative affect scale (PANAS; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988) and parenting satisfaction scale (Chang & Greenberger, 2012). To measure relationship quality and satisfaction, the enriching relationship issues, communication, and happiness scale was administered (ENRICH, Fowers & Olson, 1993).

*Economic and structural variables* were assessed through parents' reports on their income, education level, work hours and other work characteristics (flexibility, non-standard hours, home-based work etc.). The participants also indicated their ethnic background, the number of children in the household and the children's ages.

## Appendix 2: Qualitative Research Methodology

In this mixed-methods study, qualitative methods enabled us to gather rich data on the experiences of mothers and fathers who are equal sharers, reverse roles or maintain a traditional arrangement.

### Sampling and recruitment

Our sample for the qualitative part of this study covers a diverse range of parents. We used a shorter version of the quantitative study survey as a screening tool to identify different-gender couples living in the UK, who have at least one child under 11 years old (born in the UK). Couples who met the inclusion criteria for one of the three groups (see Appendix 1) were invited to be interviewed. In total, we conducted 60 interviews involving 10 couples from each study group.

The study was advertised primarily online through the project website, Twitter, Facebook and on public forums such as Mumsnet. We also relied on word of mouth and the help of relevant organisations to promote our study (these included the Fatherhood Institute, the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, Dorset Dads, Mums & Dads of Lincolnshire and The Parenting Network).

Couples willing to be interviewed were sent a participant information sheet outlining the details of the study and a consent form. Once both partners had been interviewed, they were sent some debrief information and a £30 Amazon voucher as a token of gratitude for their participation.

### Overview of the sample

Thirty couples took part in the qualitative part of this study. The participants were aged between 32 and 56 years old at the time of their interview. The families featured in our research were relatively small, with most having one or two children and a minority having three or four children. Over a third of the couples were parenting one or two children under three years old. This research was concerned with the parenting of younger children, and as such, most couples had one or two children aged between 6-11 years old. Most of the couples had no other children aged over 11 years old. Our sample overwhelmingly described themselves as having an '*English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British*' ethnic background (categories used are drawn from the Census). A minority of participants described their ethnicity as '*Irish*', '*Mixed White and Asian*' or '*Any other White background*'.

The parents who participated in this study tended to be highly educated, with over half of the individuals holding a higher degree or postgraduate qualifications. Around half of the participants worked in intermediate level jobs, followed by those in senior or managerial positions. A minority of participants worked in entry level jobs; however, almost all of



these individuals held higher postgraduate qualifications and were undertaking their PhDs at the time of interview. The participants' individual incomes varied greatly between less than £7,000 per year to over £52,000 per year. Over half of the parents in our study normally worked full-time (defined as 30 or more hours per week). The rest normally worked part-time or held zero-hours contracts (29 or less hours per week), and a few individuals were retired or unemployed.

## Couple interviews





We interviewed both partners from 30 couples to uncover the complex dynamics involved in the construction and maintenance of the 'role-reversed', 'equal sharing' and 'traditional' parenting arrangements. The interviews lasted between 1-2 hours and were conducted online via Teams, Zoom or Skype during the period November 2020 to July 2021.

Mothers and fathers were interviewed separately. Interviewing both partners in a couple enabled us to explore couple-level interactions and the negotiations involved in their sharing of responsibilities.





Before the interview began, the participants were reminded that they would be recorded, they had the right to withdraw from the study and that the data would be anonymised and kept confidential. They were also asked for their verbal consent to participate in the interview.

For the interviews, we used a semi-structured approach. This meant that the same topics were covered in each interview, but the interviewer also allowed space for participants to reflect on their everyday experiences and the underlying motivations for the distributions of labour in their household.

## The interviews covered four broad topics:

-  The division of parenting activities
-  The division of breadwinning activities
-  Satisfaction with roles
-  Perceptions of parenting

## We also asked participants about:

-  Their work characteristics and decisions about work
-  Their partners' emotions, negotiations and decision-making processes
-  The extent to which workplace and family policy have enabled or inhibited their activities
-  Covid-19 pandemic-related changes to work and parenting

## Data analysis




Each interview was audio and video recorded and then transcribed verbatim (written up word-for-word). Once transcribed, we analysed the interview data through a process of 'thematic analysis' using the software package *NVivo*, which involved identifying important themes and patterns (Braun and Clarke 2006). In addition, we wrote a detailed 'pen portrait' (Neale 2016) for each participant, which gave an overview of what we learnt about them from their interview.

We looked at commonalities and differences *within* the 'role-reversed', 'equal sharing' and 'traditional' study groups and then *across* the groups, in order to compare different work and parenting arrangements. We also explored gender differences.

Our analysis enabled us to explore and understand the variety of ways that couples in all study groups negotiated parenting and work in the context of complex policy, welfare and organisational systems that reproduce gender disparities and inequalities in parenting. We also identified ways in which couples defied or sought to challenge these trends.

## Challenges

We encountered several challenges during the qualitative phase of this research:

-  Finding couples where both partners were willing to be interviewed
-  Finding role-reversed couples (with breadwinning mothers and primary caregiving fathers)
-  Participants' limited availability for interviews due to increased work and childcare demands during the pandemic

To work within pandemic-related restrictions, we conducted interviews online rather than face to face. Online interviews enabled the research team to reach couples all over the UK, which strengthened our dataset. Online interviews were also less time-consuming (as they required no travel time for interviewer or interviewee) and could be conducted whenever convenient for the participants (including outside typical working hours).

Despite these advantages, online interviews required our participants to have a good Internet connection, a suitable device and a quiet, comfortable space in which to conduct the interview. These requirements could potentially have deterred parents from participating, especially during lockdowns and school closure periods where physical space and Internet bandwidth were under pressure in many family homes.



