

# Who gets the best deal from marriage: women or men?

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## **Abstract**

Feminists of various kinds – structural, radical, critical, materialist – have repeatedly asserted that marriage benefits men more than women and usually at women's expense. There is now a considerable body of empirical evidence that supports the major thrust of their claims. However, there are feminists adopting a post-structuralist perspective who argue that many accounts of men's dominance are overly deterministic. The argument goes that there is insufficient recognition of change that is already ensuring more rewarding marriages for women much of which is probably due to women's exercise of agency. It is further argued that, in order for women to initiate successful change, it is necessary but not sufficient for them to be aware of inequities and other shortcomings occurring at specific sites in their marriage. In the present study, a sample of 45 wives and 40 husbands were questioned to see if they agreed that men generally benefited the most from marriage, to find out what reasons they offered for their judgements and to establish if women were more conscious than men of the need for specific changes in their own marriages. The possibilities of actors negotiating successfully for specific change in the face of their partner's opposition are also considered. It is argued that women will make only limited gains until men experience a change of heart.

**Keywords:** gender consciousness and change, gender inequity, marriage, perceptions of marital benefits

## **Introduction**

In her influential study, *The Future of Marriage*, Jessie Bernard argues that, whilst both men and women benefit from marriage, '[B]eing married is only half as good for wives as for husbands' (Bernard, 1976: 40). Marriage

entails compromise for both partners, but women lose more freedom and autonomy than men, mainly because they become housewives. A wife invests more of her intellectual and emotional resources in her partner and her children than do husbands. If a marriage breaks down, the woman loses more of her economic security and material benefits than does her husband. There are two marriages, says Bernard, a man's and a woman's, but it is a woman's that needs upgrading.

Structural feminists of various kinds – radical, socialist, materialist, critical – have emphasized the causal character of the connection between women's physical and emotional work and the benefits marriage brings men (Chafetz, 1990; Hartmann, 1981; Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley, 1990). For example, Lengermann and Niebrugge-Brantley say marriage entails sexual and emotional work by women that is essential to the creation and maintenance of the health and personality of husbands. Christine Delphy and Diana Leonard have put the case for marriage benefiting men at the expense of women in more explicit and emotive language than most writers. There is Delphy's famous observation:

[M]arriage is the institution by which gratuitous work is extorted from a particular category of the population, women-wives. (1976: 77)

More recently, Delphy and Leonard offered this comprehensive description of gender exploitation:

Within the context of the family system specifically, we see men exploiting women's practical, emotional, sexual and reproductive labour. Loving women does not prevent men exploiting them. (1992: 258)

The emphasis in all these accounts written from some form of structural perspective is on continuity rather than change in a traditional system of domination and exploitation of wives by husbands. The argument goes that men use their structurally delivered access to highly valued resources and their ideological control to maintain the status quo in an institution biased in their favour (Chafetz, 1990).

### **Empirical support for the views of structural feminists**

Structural feminists have been criticized for assuming rather than demonstrating men's marital exploitation of women (Close and Collins, 1983). However, there is a considerable body of empirical research that corroborates the major thrust of their assertions. This research shows the following:

- As in the past, the great majority of wives still carry out most of a family's unpaid work. Most women's tasks are 'necessary' and performed highly frequently whereas most men's are 'discretionary' and performed sporadically. Women retain major or exclusive responsibility for ensuring housework is completed. Women also have overriding responsibility

for children (Baxter, 1993; Bianchi et al., 2000; Bittman, 1995; Demo and Acock, 1993; Sullivan, 2000).

- There is a growing body of evidence that shows women typically provide far more emotional care than they receive (Benjamin and Sullivan, 1996; Duncombe and Marsden, 1993, 1995; Erickson, 1993). It is to wives rather than husbands that family members unload their concerns. Wives ensure everyone feels included in family activities and that events such as evening meals are harmonious occasions (Burns, 1986; DeVault, 1991; Mansfield and Collard, 1988).
- The great majority of husbands resist successfully the efforts of wives to shift the boundaries of responsibility for housework, childcare or emotional work (Collis, 1999; Dempsey, 1997a, 2000; Gill, 1993; Wearing, 1990).
- Men's interests and priorities remain privileged. Women are expected to please men and organize their own lives and family life accordingly (Benjamin, 1998). There is research that shows that women occupy less physical space in the house and even in the matrimonial bed than their partners (Burns, 1986).
- The home is more likely to be a place of leisure for men whilst remaining more of a place of work for women, especially when the family workload is greatest, such as during the first months of a child's life. Men are more likely than their partners to have superior opportunities and resources for leisure away from home (Bittman, 1991; Bittman and Wajcman, 2000; Dempsey, 1992, 1997a).

### **The critique of post-structuralists**

The writings of structural feminists, such as Delphy and Leonard, and Hartmann, have also been criticized by a number of feminists adopting a post-structuralist or postmodernist perspective for exaggerating the extent of men's oppression and for ignoring the ability of women to exercise agency (Benjamin and Sullivan, 1999; Gerson and Peiss, 1985; Wearing, 1990). For example, Betsy Wearing argues that if we focus mainly on women's oppression we exclude the possibility of transforming the present situation. Women, she says, can increase their leisure by resisting the demands of husbands that they prioritize looking after house and husband. Benjamin and Sullivan (1999) state that there is systematic evidence of a reduction in gender inequality in the domestic division of labour. These scholars suggest that some of this reduction may be due to women negotiating successfully with their husbands to increase their participation in housework.

In this paper, I draw on the insights of feminists adopting what for convenience can be called a post-structuralist perspective as well as those adopting what also for convenience can be called a structuralist perspective. It is assumed that women as well as men shape their lives to a meaningful degree. For example, members of both sexes use the material resources,

symbols, norms and social skills at their disposal to achieve their ends, which may include dominating a partner or attempting to negotiate a significant shift in the boundaries of their marital relationship. However, it is also assumed that structural forces always constrain personal autonomy and the exercise of individual power. Marriage, like many institutions in modern society, is organized in such a way as to deliver more cultural, material and social power to men. It is a hierarchical institution in which domination and negotiation occur simultaneously (Gerson and Peiss, 1985). It is further assumed that before negotiation will be attempted the consciousness of the disadvantaged partner must be raised. Linda Thompson says: 'Gender consciousness is central to whether or not partners, particularly women, push for change in their marriages' (1993: 566).

Only Benjamin and Oriel Sullivan argue that such consciousness needs to be highly focused for women to even contemplate trying to bargain with their husbands. This means they need to be aware of inequalities or other problems occurring at specific sites in their marriages. If, instead, there is present only a diffuse awareness that things should be different, then negotiation and therefore significant change is most unlikely to occur (Benjamin and Sullivan, 1999).

### **Limited research on women's and men's consciousness of the need for marital change**

Unfortunately, there has been little research directed at establishing whether women or men are conscious of the need for change to occur in one or more aspects of their marriage and how strongly they feel about change occurring or not occurring. Of use, however, are the following: the recent batch of studies of women's and men's perception of the fairness of the divisions of housework and childcare; several qualitative accounts of marital relationships; and a number of studies of the problems in their former marriages cited by divorcees.

Studies in which male and female respondents have been asked to report on whether they think the divisions of housework and childcare are fair show that only about one-third of females and a smaller proportion of males report that the present division of unpaid tasks is unfair to themselves or their partners (Baxter, 2000; Dempsey, 1999; Sanchez, 1994). The same respondents provide information that shows that in the great majority of marriages women bear an inordinate share of the family's unpaid workload. There is evidence, however, that many women may be less satisfied than these findings indicate. For example, in some studies, half the women interviewed say they would like their partners to do more inside jobs (Berk, 1985; Dempsey, 2000). Nevertheless, a substantial number of women fail to indicate a consciousness of the need to shift any of the gender boundaries in their marriage. Such findings suggest that many wives do not share the beliefs of structural feminists who claim women get a worse deal from marriage than men.

There are, however, a number of in-depth marital studies and a larger number of studies of the views of divorcees of their former marriages that do suggest that many women would say that the judgements that structural feminists make apply, to at least some degree, in their own marriages. Many of the females interviewed for in-depth studies expressed dissatisfaction with their marriage, and reported that they wanted their partners to change their behaviour and attitudes (Hochschild, 1989; Hood, 1983; Mansfield and Collard, 1988). For example, Mansfield and Collard stress that the women they interviewed expected more of their husbands both practically and affectively than they were prepared to give. The wives complained their husbands failed to provide the degree of emotional support and intimacy they believed they were entitled to. The women were much more likely than the men to report feeling let down emotionally.

Reports of self-described causes of marital breakdown reach back to William Goode's (1956) celebrated study of Detroit women's adjustment to divorce, and include Ilene Wolcott and Jody Hughes's recent Australian study, *Towards Understanding the Reasons for Divorce* (1999). These studies show that women are more likely than men to blame partners for the breakdown of a relationship whilst men are more likely than women to blame themselves. The explanations of both male and female respondents concentrate principally on affective factors. These include poor communication, lack of affection and love, insufficient time spent at home (Amato and Rogers, 1997; Kitson, 1992; Spanier and Thompson, 1987; Wolcott and Hughes, 1999). However, instrumental factors, such as disputes over housework and childcare, are cited as causes of marital disruption in a few accounts (Kitson, 1992; Spanier and Thompson, 1987).

Although the accounts of divorcees' views are very insightful, it cannot be assumed that they will match those of people who are currently married. As Amato and Rogers stress: '[S]pouses define certain behaviour as problems only when they have already given up on their marriages and are about to break up' (Amato and Rogers, 1997: 613). Further inquiries about the perceptions of men and women who are currently married may indicate whether participants of either sex believe that one sex gains more from the marriage than the other. They may also show whether women are more likely than men to believe there is a need for change in their marriage; and, if there is, what specific changes they think should occur.

### **Purpose of the paper**

The present study was undertaken to establish if women or men shared the views of those structural feminists, such as Bernard (1976) and Delphy (1976), and profeminists, such as Bell and Newby (1976) and McMahon (1999), that men get a much better deal from marriage than women. It was also undertaken to see what support there was for the views of feminists taking a post-structuralist or postmodernist perspective who affirm that

women are more conscious of the need for change than the writings of many structural feminists suggest. Benjamin and Sullivan observe:

[G]ender consciousness can be thought of as a continuum along which a generalized gender awareness is succeeded by a consciousness of the rights associated within specific gender locations within a given system. (1999: 797)

We were interested in establishing whether the attitudes of our respondents were more towards the specific than the generalized end of this continuum and, if they were towards the specific end, what were the chances they would press their partners to enter into negotiations with them, and what were their chances of success if they did?

The key questions the paper addresses are these:

- Who do members of this sample think are getting the best deal from marriage: husbands or wives?
- What reasons do they offer for the global judgement they make?
- Are their perceptions consistent with the claims of structural feminists who say men are getting the best deal?
- When making their judgements about marital relationships generally what appears to matter the most to respondents: instrumental factors (division of workload, opportunities for leisure, etc.), or affective factors (companionship, emotional support), or both?
- Are men and women in agreement or do they differ significantly in their judgements and justifications?
- Are there gender differences in the nature and extent of complaints men and women offer about their own marriages?
- How equitable are the reported divisions of housework, childcare and opportunities for leisure?
- Do the perceptions offered by respondents about specific aspects of their own marriages – instrumental, emotional and companionate – indicate a consciousness of a need for any changes?
- What is the likelihood of any initiative they take succeeding?

### **The study and characteristics of the sample**

In 1999, 85 Melbourne respondents participated in a study of marital relationships. No two respondents came from the same household. In 45 households the wife was interviewed and in 40 households the husband. For some purposes it would have been helpful to interview both partners. However, in this instance we did not do so because our purpose was to make gender rather than husband/wife comparisons. I designed the interview schedule. The interviews were carried out by students participating in an undergraduate course on marriage at La Trobe University. All interviewers were given eight hours' training with the interview schedule. In addition, students were required to complete homework exercises on sociological

readings dealing with issues central to the inquiry. The interviews were taped and fully transcribed. I took responsibility for the coding and analysis of the data.

The findings from this study cannot be generalized statistically. We worked with what is, in effect, a convenience sample. Students chose their own respondents. They were, however, requested to try and obtain respondents from households where both partners were engaged in paid work and where there was at least one dependent child present. These requests were made because of our interest in marital equity in the division of labour and perceptions of equity. It has been established repeatedly that the household workload is greatest when these conditions prevail.

The use of students for data collection may raise some eyebrows. However, previous research has shown that students collect reliable data when choosing their own respondents from members of the general public (Noller et al., 1997). In this instance, students were given extensive briefing on the purpose of the interviews and the schedule was examined in detail in class. Ethical approval was sought and gained from the appropriate university ethics committee for conducting the research. The content and purpose of the interview were explained to each potential interviewee and her/his signed approval was gained before proceeding with the interview. Each student conducted three interviews and each interview lasted on average between one and one-and-a-half hours. I checked the findings for internal consistency. Five interviews were excluded because they failed to meet this criterion. On issues where the topic under research was similar to that of previous studies (e.g. the divisions of housework and childcare, and opportunities for leisure), there was usually a fair degree of consistency between the new findings and those from the earlier studies. It should be borne in mind that in exploratory research of this nature the major concern is not with representativeness of the findings but with gaining some insights on matters where not a great deal is known: insights which hopefully will form the basis for research with more representative samples.

Women's average age was 33 years and men's 37 years. There was at least one dependent child present in about two-thirds of the households (68 percent). The ethnic background of respondents was as follows. Thirty-three percent of the women were of Anglo-Celtic background as were 43 percent of the men. Fifty percent of the women and 35 percent of the men had Greek, Italian, Turkish or Macedonian backgrounds, and the remaining men and women identified with either Asian or other European ethnic groups.

All of the men and about three-quarters of the women had paying jobs. Men were more likely to be employed full time and to work longer hours than women. Women were engaged in paid employment for an average of 31 hours per week compared to men's average of 47 hours. Men were more

likely to have a middle-class job (66 percent versus 50 percent).<sup>1</sup> The typical middle-class jobs for men were teaching, computer programming and engineering, middle management positions in finance and planning, retailing, and the hospitality industry, and small business ownership. For women, the more common middle-class jobs were as follows: nursing, teaching and customer service; receptionists and flight attendants; and self-employment in retailing. Men in working-class jobs were employed as tradesmen (e.g. fitter and turner), drivers, maintenance men and labourers. Women occupying working-class positions were employed as shop assistants, cooks, packers and process workers. One-third of both men and women had a tertiary educational qualification. Women contributed, on average, a little less than one-third of a couple's income (30 percent).

Respondents were questioned about both instrumental and affective aspects of their marriage relationships. The schedule was comprised of structured and open-ended questions. Male and female respondents were asked to supply information on the number of hours each partner engaged in housework and childcare, and how much responsibility each took for each of these areas of activity. Respondents were asked whether they believed marriage usually benefited one gender more than the other and were requested to give reasons for their overall judgement. This procedure was adopted because in a previous study of marriage (Dempsey, 1992) it was found that, if respondents were asked about marriages in general, they almost always talked about their own marriages and often more willingly than if they were asked questions specifically about their own marriages. In addition, we also questioned respondents directly about several facets of their own marriage. The issues they were questioned about included: respondents' perceptions of the fairness of the division of work, childcare and opportunities for leisure; the availability of emotional support from their partners; the willingness of partners to discuss respondents' worries or problems; the extent to which partners caused respondents to feel loved and cared for; how much criticism they received and for what kinds of things; and ways in which respondents would like partners' behaviour to change. Respondents were asked specifically if they would like partners to be less busy with work or outside interests; more interested in physical lovemaking; more responsive and receptive when engaged in conversation with them; exercise more initiative in planning activities to do together. They were also asked how happy they were with their marriage at the present time.

There were numerous opportunities during the course of rather lengthy interviews, which included many follow-up questions and probes, for respondents to offer their approval or complaint, or a mixture of both, about key aspects of their relationship and the behaviour of their partner.



## Results

### **Inequality in the division of labour and opportunities for leisure**

Husbands as well as wives reported that wives – including those in full-time paid employment – carried out the bigger share of housework and childcare. The information provided by male as well as female respondents showed men performed on average 75 percent of outside tasks (for example, mowing the lawn) but women almost 90 percent of inside tasks (for example, cooking and cleaning) and 80 percent of childcare tasks. It has been demonstrated repeatedly that inside tasks take at least twice as much time as outside ones (Baxter, 1993; Bittman, 1995). In addition, respondents of both sexes stated that almost nine out of ten women took overall responsibility for childcare and housework. It has also been shown repeatedly that inside tasks are likely to interfere more with external activities including paid employment and leisure activities.

There was some variability in the nature and extent of men's participation in the tasks traditionally performed by wives. On the one hand, many men were doing very little or nothing to reduce their wives' load. For example, 60 percent of the wives said their husbands did at most 10 percent of the inside tasks. More than half of the wives of these men had paying jobs. Two wives engaged in full-time paid work were married to men reported to provide no assistance at all with inside work. On the other hand, a number of husbands were doing a substantial amount of inside work and childcare. In particular, two of the 45 wives said their husbands carried out 50 percent of the inside tasks. Altogether, 13 wives (29 percent) reported that their husbands carried out between 20 and 50 percent of inside tasks. Three of the 13 husbands shared equally major responsibility for the inside tasks.

Women spend substantially less time than their husbands engaged in leisure activities both inside and outside the home. For example, respondents were three times as likely to say husbands had more outside leisure than wives (46 percent vs 14 percent). The remainder said they both had an equal amount of leisure. Only one in ten male respondents said that their wives had more leisure than they did outside the home.

### **Who gets the best deal from marriage?**

When this question was put to respondents, about three-quarters of the women said that men got the best deal (78 percent). Men were more divided in their judgements. Nevertheless, 40 percent did agree that they did better from marriage than women. Only a minority of male (25 percent) and female (16 percent) respondents said women got the best deal. Men were much more likely than women to state that both sexes did equally well out of marriage (35 percent vs 7 percent). When asked to explain the judgement

they had made, many respondents talked mainly or exclusively about their own marriage.

### **Women's explanations of their judgements**

#### **Men get the best deal**

Of the women who said men gained the most benefits from marriage, about two-thirds considered this was because men were looked after by their wives, or were not burdened with housework and childcare, or both (68 percent):

I say it [men get the best deal] because he [her husband] gets all his physical needs met. Basically he doesn't have to do anything at home: cook, clean, anything like that. (30-year-old psychology counsellor)

Quite a few women drew an analogy between the care mothers provided for sons and the type of care wives provided for their husbands:

They [men] seem to go from their mother to another mother, some of them anyway. (46-year-old sales assistant)

Some women emphasized that men were better off because wives were always there for what one called the 'husband-child':

Men are more certain [than women are about their partner] that the partner is always going to be there for them. Women take up a mother-like role and continue to mother them: feeding them; washing up after them; and so on. (25-year-old telemarketer)

Several women mentioned that men were looked after more than women were looked after:

Women get looked after to a certain amount financially but men get looked after physically. (40-year-old consultant)

Many women emphasized that men got the best deal because they were free of responsibility for housework and for caring for children:

Husbands [have the best deal because they] are exempted from responsibility for household chores and jobs to do with the children. (23-year-old salesperson)

Some of these women stressed that housework and childcare entailed emotional and mental work as well as physical work:

They don't have the full responsibility of running a house like we do. They have their job [paid] and their outside jobs at home, but they don't have all the mental stress and worry of the problems to do with the kids and sorting out different things in the household. (47-year-old salesperson)

Several women pointed out that they too had a paid job as well as the responsibility at home:

Women have a greater responsibility than men. In today's society we have to go out to work but when we come back we've got the household to look after and the children. We have to think about what is going on tomorrow and the day after tomorrow. We have to plan for the situations that will arise. I have to prepare the children's clothes for the following morning. In my case my husband will do what he is told but he has to be told! (34-year-old flight attendant)

In the justifications they offered for saying men got the best deal, 25 percent of the women made a reference to men's greater freedom:

He's out of the house because he doesn't have anything to do at home and he's mixing with people at work. (30-year-old student)

Some women saw men's best deal in marriage as one manifestation of their advantaged position in society:

Men get a better deal in life generally. They get more choice over what happens to their bodies. They get better opportunities in their career. As for me, in five years I'll still be a mother and wife. (27-year-old homemaker)

### **Women do better from marriage than men**

One in six women said that they got the best deal. These women usually attributed their perceived greater gains to men's responsibility to serve as the family's principal or sole economic provider:

Women get the best deal because men have a huge responsibility. They have to support their families and homes for the rest of their lives. No thank you. (40-year-old homemaker)

Women were also likely to attribute their better deal to their opportunity to have children or to the opportunity to experience the joy of raising them:

I get the chance to watch the kids grow up. I see them take their first steps. I hear their first words. He misses out on most of this because he is away at work all the time. (36-year-old homemaker married to a factory manager working 53 hours each week)

### **Men's explanations for their judgements**

#### **Men get the best deal**

Four in ten men reported that they got a better deal from marriage than their wives. Some of these men (like many women) explained their judgement by saying that women (not men) were stuck with responsibility for the work at home:

A woman's responsibilities don't end when her husband comes home. A lot of men think that it's a woman's job to do everything. (37-year-old police officer)

The man gets the better deal because the wife is the caretaker. She runs the family, looks after everything. As a man I am more career oriented. The family's development is her concern. (30-year-old self-employed tradesman)

Several men attributed their better deal to the mothering activity their wives practised on their behalf. Some of these stressed the total character of their care: emotional as well as physical:

Men are like babies. You know when they are born their mothers treat them like gods then they only leave home so that their wives can treat them like gods. Why don't they live on their own? They have to get married because they cannot cope by themselves! Women are stronger than men they can survive on their own but men need the companionship of women. (37-year-old credit controller)

There were men (as well as women) who stressed that men's greater autonomy ensured they had the best deal:

Marriage seems to work more for men. Women lose their vehicle out into society by giving up their jobs to raise children so they don't have the sphere of freedom that men still have by having their job. (32-year-old clerk)

### **Women get the best deal**

One in four men offered the assessment that women gained the most from marriage. Some of these men argued that women were more in need of support than the other way around. They were stereotyped as the fragile sex whom men protected:

Women are a bit weaker than men and so they need more looking after. They need more care and emotional support. (34-year-old small business owner)

Some men argued that women got the best deal in marriage because they were dependent economically on men:

Well I say women get the best deal because in a lot of cases they are provided for in a marriage. (32-year-old office manager)

Women always get the best of everything. They get diamonds, jewels. They get shoes, dresses, you name it, they've got it. They are happy if they've got a husband that owns a factory – wow! (50-year-old clothing manufacturer)

### **Both men and women gain, if in different ways**

About one-third of men said it was not possible to decide which sex gained most from marriage and opted for the position that both benefited equally:

Both get a good deal because men and women contribute equally in different ways. (33-year-old computer operator)

Depends on the partnership and how eager they both are to make it work. It's equal. (40-year-old schoolteacher)

It is not possible to say because the man gets what he gets from a marriage and a woman gets what she gets. If you're both happy and in love then it's neither gets the better deal. (49-year-old media consultant)

They both get something out of the marriage. (42-year-old security guard)

### **Respondents' perceptions of their marriages**

The answers provided by respondents to questions about their own marriages reinforced the message they communicated when talking about marriage in general. Women proved to be less satisfied with their marriages than men and they revealed a greater awareness of the need for change. For example, wives were less likely to say they were *very* happy with their marriage relationship (47 percent vs 65 percent) or to agree with the statement: 'Every new thing I learn about my partner pleases me' (47 percent vs 75 percent). When asked which they found the most rewarding – caring for children, doing other jobs at home and caring for one's partner – women were much less likely than men to choose caring for one's partner (12 percent vs 44 percent). Wives were also much keener about achieving substantial changes in their marriages. For example, they were more likely to say they did not want their marriages to go on in the future in the same way as they had in the past (58 percent vs 30 percent).

Women lodged far more specific complaints than men about the attitudes and behaviour of partners. One woman made 28 separate complaints. Two-thirds of women made three or more complaints. Only one-quarter of the men made as many. Women expressed more dissatisfaction with the instrumental aspects of their marital relationships. In particular, a larger proportion of women than of men reported that the following were unfair to them: the divisions of housework (including 'inside' and 'outside' tasks) (71 percent vs 10 percent); childcare (64 percent vs 4 percent); and the opportunities for leisure (40 percent vs 5 percent).

Women also offered far more complaints than men about the affective and companionate aspects of their relationships. These included the following:

- inadequate communication (38 percent vs 18 percent);
- spending insufficient time with partner (51 percent vs 23 percent);
- being too busy with either work or outside interests (71 percent vs 30 percent);
- failing to exercise sufficient initiative in organizing joint activities (76 percent vs 48 percent).

The only aspect of marital relationships men were more likely to want to change in the future was physical love-making. Thirty-three percent of men compared to two percent of women complained that their partner showed insufficient interest in physical love-making.

## Discussion and conclusion

This paper opened with Jessie Bernard's claim that marriage was twice as good for men as for women, and women's marriages needed upgrading. The evidence that has been reviewed concerning the division of unpaid work and opportunities for leisure among members of this sample corroborates rather than challenges her view and the views of structuralists such as Chafetz (1990) and Delphy and Leonard (1992), and profeminists, such as McMahon (1999). It is important to stress that the results showing that women carry an inordinate share of the load at home cannot be attributed to the unrepresentative nature of the sample. These findings are consistent with those from many recent studies in which a probability sample has been used (Bittman, 1995; Wilkie et al., 1998). Similarly, the finding that men are likely to experience greater opportunities for leisure especially away from home has been replicated in a number of previous studies (Bittman and Wajcman, 2000; Deem, 1986). However, it also needs emphasizing that a minority of men were supplying substantial assistance with inside tasks. Ferree (1991) and Benjamin and Sullivan (1999) say we should not take as our benchmark for assessing whether significant change is occurring an equal sharing of tasks. Rather, we should see as promising small increases in men's willingness to respond to their wife's need for greater involvement as circumstances changed. From an employed wife's point of view, there is a world of difference between a husband who does nothing in the face of his wife's requests and one who is prepared to be flexible and assist as the need arises. Wives do not always see it that way. Many, it appears, are now pressing for husbands to share daily responsibility for tasks rather than help when the need arises (Dempsey, 2000).

The large majority of women respondents in this study expressed views that were more consonant with the main thrust of the arguments advanced by feminists writing from a structural perspective than a post-structuralist perspective. Four out of five of them gave reasons for saying men (including their own husbands) got the best deal from marriage that were tantamount to saying men used the physical, emotional and psychological labour of wives without adequate reciprocity. Not only did most of these women say wives took much better care of men than vice versa but that men were on the better wicket in part because wives took care of men's children and also because men enjoyed more personal autonomy and leisure. Frequently, wives linked these latter gains to their physical and emotional labour.

A minority of men concurred with the judgements of women. But most men expressed either the view that women got the best deal or that both partners did equally well from marriage.

The views expressed in this study – particularly by female respondents – about marriage in general and their own marriages in particular confirmed in important respects the findings from several previous in-depth studies of

marital attitudes and from studies of the attitudes of divorcees concerning their former marriages. As in such studies, the women in the present study were more critical than men of their partners. And, as in the previous research, the complaints of female respondents focused on men's failure to provide sufficient emotional support, companionship and intimacy. However, the women in this study were much more incensed about the inequity of their domestic workload and their lesser personal autonomy than were female divorcees when asked to talk about why their former marriages dissolved.

This difference in outcomes may be due to differences in research methods. Often researchers fail to ask divorcees specific questions aimed at eliciting their views on the domestic division of labour in their former marriages. Respondents in this study were questioned directly on this matter. Perhaps issues of domestic and childcare overload play a greater part in marital breakdown than many retrospective reports of divorcees suggest (Kitson, 1992). There is also the possibility that resentment over instrumental aspects of the marriage assumes greater significance when the situation producing the dissatisfaction is more immediate than located at some time in the past.

The women in the current study were more than twice as likely as those surveyed in previous representative studies of perceptions of marital equity to say that the divisions of housework and childcare were unfair to them. This difference could also be the product of sampling bias, as a convenience sample was used for the present study. However, the higher proportion of women declaring the division of unpaid work to be unfair may reflect the fact that respondents were given many opportunities to talk in their own words about various aspects of their marriage. Such an approach may encourage more respondents to acknowledge that their partner is treating them unfairly than an approach which utilizes only highly structured questions as is the case with the typical large-scale survey of perceptions of fairness. What is true is that the finding that most women declared the division of unpaid work was unfair to them was consistent with the specific criticisms most of them made about their partners' failure to carry out sufficient work at home. Perhaps far more women perceive they are being treated unfairly than most current surveys of women's perceptions of fairness indicate.

Most of the women interviewed for this study revealed what post-structuralist feminists assert is the necessary if not sufficient condition for change: an awareness of inequities and other shortcomings occurring at specific sites in their marriage. Unfortunately, awareness that things need changing is rarely transformed in a straightforward way into a more equitable or satisfying situation (Benjamin and Sullivan, 1999). Women often fail to get onto the table for discussion the things they want changed. For example, Benjamin and Sullivan deliberately included in their sample for an

in-depth study of marital consciousness and change women who had proven negotiating skills (marriage counsellors and social workers). Yet, the authors report that most interviewees 'could not bring their partner to discuss certain issues' (Benjamin and Sullivan, 1999: 808). They go on to say: 'Of the 28 marital conversations which were described 17 excluded housework as a topic of conversation' (Benjamin and Sullivan, 1999: 808). In each instance, it was excluded because one or both partners believed to include it would be tantamount to challenging the relationship itself. Half the interviewees also reported that the issues of intimacy and emotional support were excluded from the marital conversation for similar reasons.

Even if a wife can get a husband to the negotiating table, achieving change in key facets of marital relationships will often prove very difficult. Both partners have important resources that can deliver power but, up to this point in time, males are far more advantaged than females structurally and ideologically. As Ferree observes: 'Gender disadvantage in the wider society [which favours men] is transmitted into the internal power structure of the individual household' (1991: 160). In an Australian context, the research of Wearing (1990), Gill (1993), Collis (1999) and Dempsey (1997b, 2000) shows how difficult it is for women when faced with the resistance of their partners to redress wrongs over such crucial matters as unpaid workload, personal autonomy, or opportunities for leisure.

### **Husbands need to surrender power and privilege**

The likelihood of achieving more equitable and emotionally rewarding marriages will be greatly enhanced if those who benefit the most from present arrangements – that is men – change their outlook, feelings and behaviour. The information provided by the husbands we interviewed suggests that probably a majority would be indifferent or resistant to any attempts of their wives to negotiate substantial changes over such matters as the divisions of unpaid work and prevailing leisure arrangements. They may also be resistant to the attempts of wives to change existing patterns of communication and emotional support, but a substantial minority may be responsive to such overtures.

However, it is also true that the answers provided by a substantial minority of men to questions about who gets the best deal from marriage provided some grounds for optimism. Forty percent of the men did agree that husbands got the best deal and they commonly attributed men's better deal to the same factors as most of the female respondents: women's greater housework and emotional workload and, to a lesser extent, men's greater emotional dependence on partners. It was apparent from the interviews that, when they were asked to offer their views on marriage in general, men were extrapolating from their own marital experience. Consequently, we were encouraged to believe that the men were conscious of the need for specific changes in their own marriage. We were also encouraged by finding



that a majority of these same men articulated egalitarian ideals when asked how they believed domestic tasks should be divided between husbands and wives. For example, 81 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement:

Both partners in a relationship should divide evenly the household tasks of washing dishes, preparing meals and doing the laundry.

However, their responses to other questions suggested that it would be a mistake to be overly optimistic about the readiness of these men to agree to substantial changes in their marital relationships. More than two-thirds of the men supplied information that showed either their wives had an inequitably large share of housework and childcare or that they (that is the men) had more opportunities than wives to engage in leisure activities outside the home. Most men were advantaged in at least two of these three respects. Yet, only a minority of them said they were doing less than their fair share either of housework (37 percent) or childcare (18 percent) or that their wife's opportunity for leisure was unfair (44 percent). The comments some of the men volunteered communicated the message that it was not their fault that their wives had a greater workload. Rather it was the unlucky break that went with being women. Two-thirds of these men also said that men were not as loving and connected to other people as women. It is plausible to argue that beliefs such as these will allow men to justify to themselves and others leaving most of the caring work to their wives.

### **Qualified optimism about the future**

Notwithstanding what has just been said, there are some empirical grounds for optimism about relationships becoming more equitable and more emotionally rewarding in the future. This study together with some earlier studies strongly suggests that many women have had their consciousness raised about the inequalities and other problems occurring at specific locations in their marriage. It is also true that some women have negotiated successfully with husbands for changes in such things as the division of unpaid work, the quality of communication and affective relationships (Benjamin and Sullivan, 1999; Collis, 1999; Dempsey, 2000). Often these women have gained much less than they were seeking but they have improved their situation to a limited degree.

We also know that the chance of women achieving more equitable marriages in the future will be increased if they have been engaged in full-time paid work for a considerable period of time (Gershuny, 1995, cited by Benjamin and Sullivan, 1999). Women are more likely to bargain successfully for change if they define themselves and their husbands define them as co-providers rather than as supplementary earners (Hood, 1983) and women's negotiating skills are enhanced (Benjamin and Sullivan, 1999; Komter, 1989).

Benjamin and Sullivan (1999) suggest that, in order to increase the ability of women to achieve more equitable marriages, it would be helpful to have more in-depth research that focuses on interactive processes in marriages where women negotiate successfully with their husbands. Hopefully, such research will elucidate the resources, attitudes and strategies that facilitate achieving difficult transformations and alert us to those strategies that reduce the likelihood of women making substantial gains. But women's attempts to bargain successfully for change are still more often than not thwarted by men's refusal to sacrifice some of their power and change their attitudes and feelings. Men's professed egalitarianism and emotional empathy with their wives are often shallow rather than supported by powerful feelings that this is how relationships ought to be. The educative effort of feminists and profeminists should now target men. Men have learnt to say the right things (which can be a way of heading off significant change) rather than develop a moral commitment to achieving more equitable and emotionally rewarding marriages. As Susan Maushart (2001) said recently, it is men rather than women who need to experience a change of heart.

## Note

- 1 Classes are defined here as aggregates of people sharing similar market situations, as indexed by occupation and employment status (Jones and Davis, 1986).

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