



Feminist Economics

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What is feminist economics?



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Studies **gender roles** in the economy; recognizes that gender matters for economic processes/outcomes

Studies **biases in the content and methodology** of the economics discipline

Studies **social provisioning** (everything that human beings need to survive and flourish) [**content**]

“The goal of Feminist Economics is not just to develop more illuminating theories, but to improve the **conditions of living** for all children, women, and men” (www.feministeconomics.org).

Who are feminist economists?



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This is what a feminist economist looks like. Photo series by Stephanie Seguino
(<http://www.stephanieseguino.com/this-is-what-a-feminist-economist-looks-like.html>)

Starting points



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Economic activity: market/paid work *and* **unpaid work**

Interaction between **social norms, individual preferences** and **behavior, and policies**

Economic outcomes/processes shaped by **gender**, which intersects with **other** social identities

Human well-being (not income) the yardstick of economic success

Pluralism in methods and models



Mainstream economists also now work increasingly on **gender** and **families**.

Where do feminist economists differ from mainstream perspectives?

1. Defining work
2. Measuring and valuing economic activity
3. Conceptualizing the individual
4. Modeling household decisions
5. Methods

What is work?



Source: Red Women's Workshop © 2019 Oakland Museum of California.

Unpaid work (housework or caring for children and other dependents) usually not included in economic definitions of “work.”

What is work?

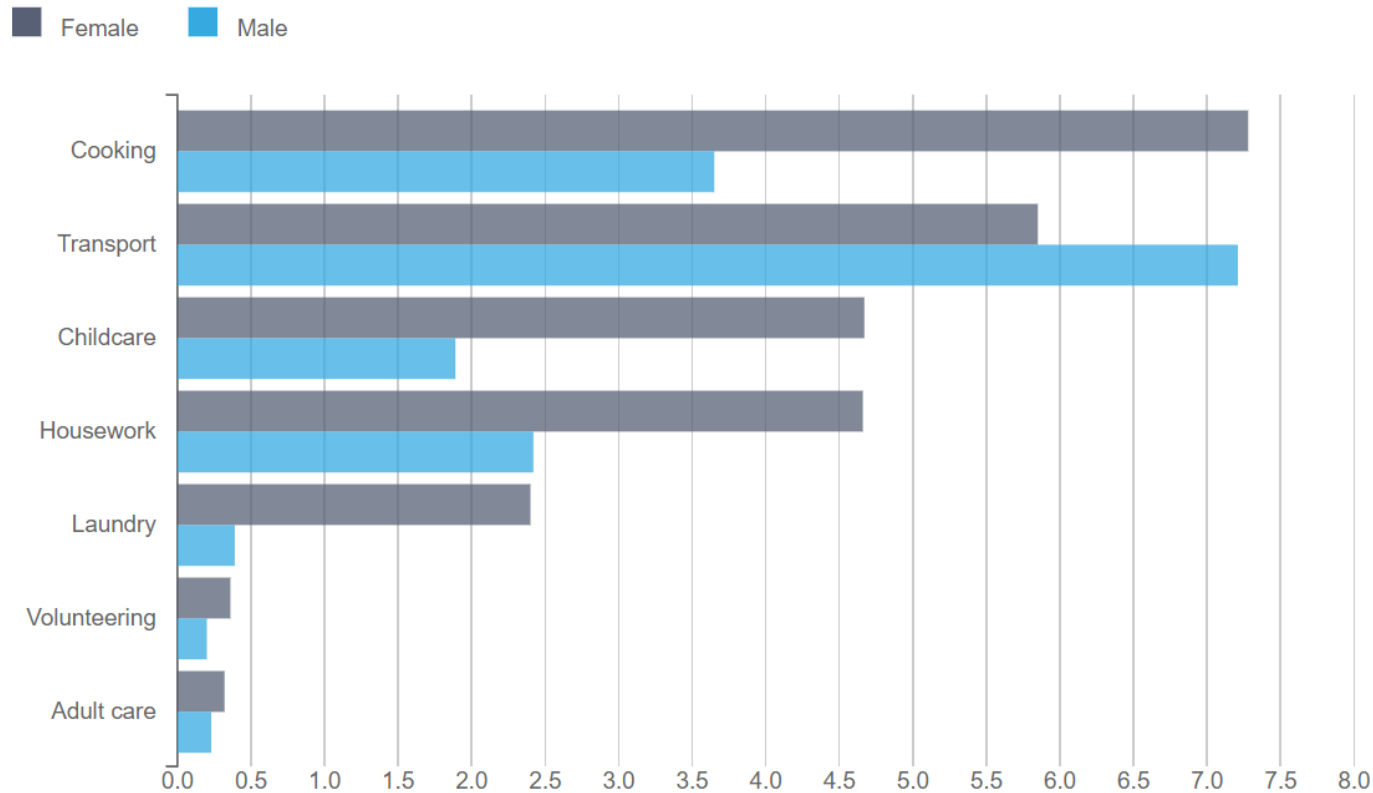
Mainstream: work as disutility, requires compensation/income (**work = paid work**)

Feminist: any activity that one could, at least in theory, pay someone else to do (**work = paid + unpaid work**) (also known as the third-party or **Reid criterion**)

What is at stake?



Average hours of unpaid work done per week in each category for men and women, UK, 2015



Source: UK Harmonised European Time Use Survey (HETUS), 2015

Number of hours

Source: **“Women shoulder the responsibility of 'unpaid work'.”** ONS 2016. shorturl.at/lqAZ7.
Men do about 16 hours of unpaid work a week, on average, while women do 26.



Ought we to quantify the value
to unpaid work?

Why? (Or why not?)

How would you value an
hour of unpaid work?

Existing measures of economic activity (e.g., GDP)
value unpaid work at zero

Feminist economists: unpaid work makes
important contributions to living standards

It also helps generate human capabilities,
intrinsically valuable but also important for
economic growth

Principles of valuation (see Folbre 2015 on reading
list): replacement vs. opportunity costs

Measuring economic activity (cont.)



GDP

Inputs	Outputs		
	Monetary value of goods and services produced (1)	Utility or happiness (2)	Capabilities and other social indicators of intrinsic value (3)
Market exchanges of labour and commodities	Current national accounts*	Subjective measures of impact of market income and market work	Human capabilities such as health, education and opportunities for self-realization.
Non-market work and intra-family transfers	Valuation of non-market work and intra-family income transfers	Subjective measures of impact of non-market activities and transfers	
Natural assets and ecological services	Depreciation and replacement cost estimates	Subjective measures of environmental values (based on contingent valuation or revealed preferences)	

Source: Folbre (2015)

The value of household production



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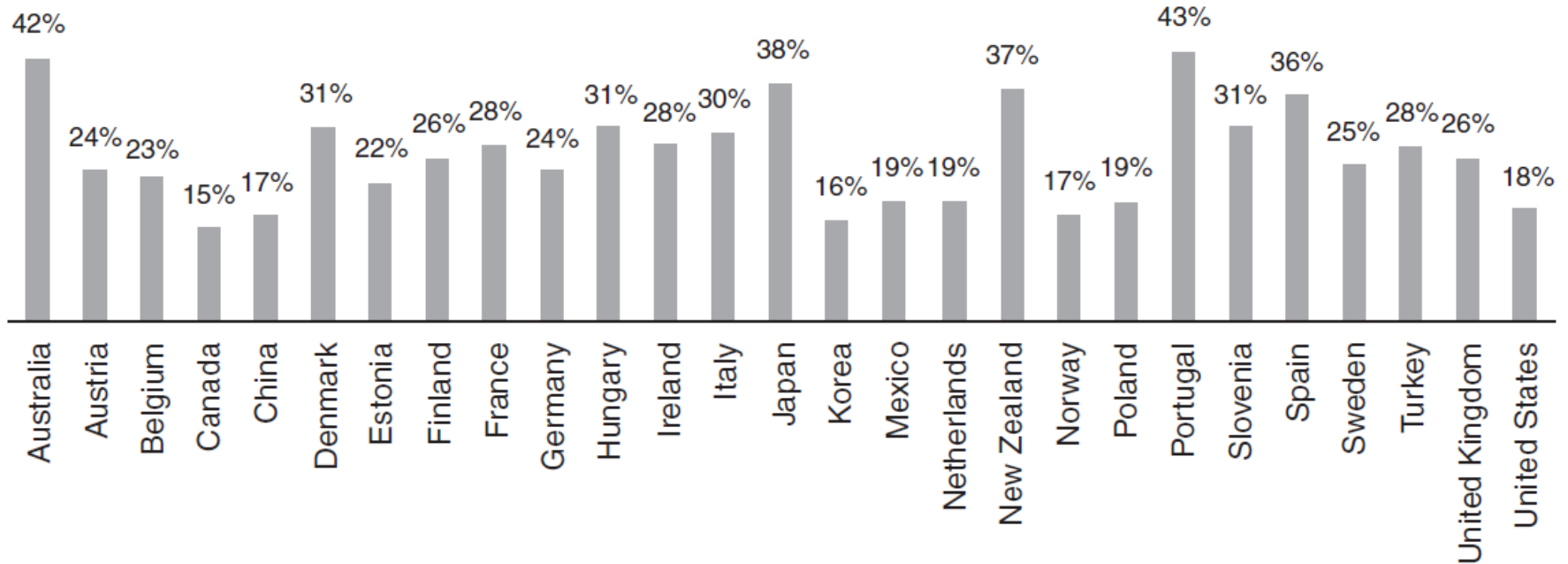


Figure 5.1 Value of household production relative to conventional GDP in 2008 (replacement cost estimates)

Source: Fischer et al. Rethinking Economics, chapter 5. "Feminist Economics"

Homo economicus: the “economic man” of neoclassical economics: independent decisions and exogenous preferences

Recent **mainstream** work on gender:
preferences vs. **discrimination** dichotomy
(see [Lundberg 2023](#) for an excellent critique)

For example: women have lower pay because they “choose” occupations and employers that satisfy their “preferences” for flexibility or helping others.



Why does this framing matter?

Feminist economists emphasize a **historically specific** analysis that is attentive to **social structures**.

- Social embeddedness
- Preferences influenced by social norms
- Social norms themselves are the product of collective action and policy

See [England 2005](#) on the reading list for feminist theories of care.

Gary Becker's *A Treatise on the Family* (1991) extends neoclassical economics/rational choice theory to families

- **Unitary** decision-making: altruistic [male] household “head”
- Efficient outcomes

Feminist economics: household decisions formed by **bargaining** between family members

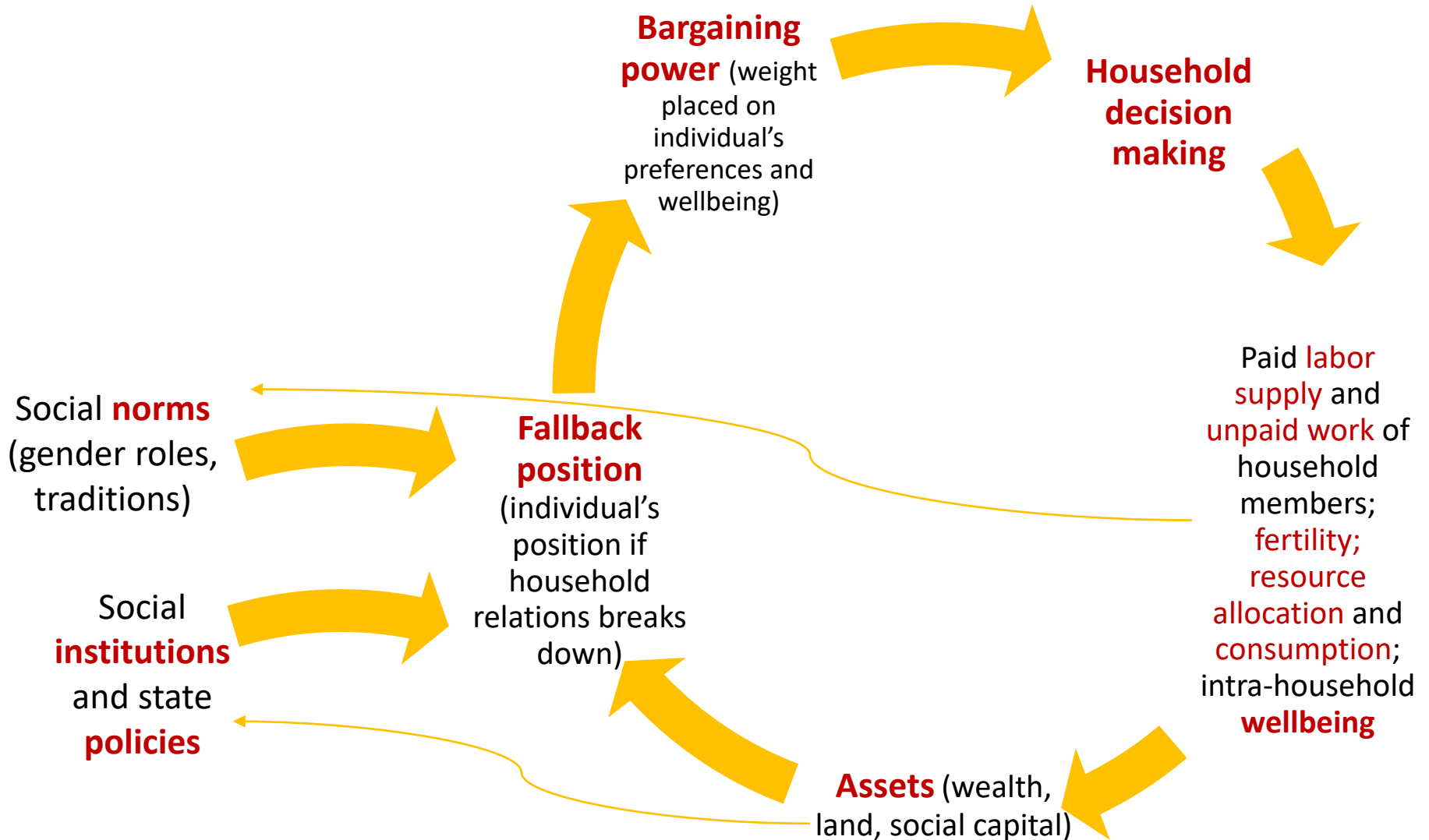
- Fallback positions (power) matter for household outcomes
- Inefficient outcomes are possible

Empirical evidence: intrahousehold distribution of consumption depends significantly *on which household members receive or control income.*

Household bargaining in feminist economics



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Mainstream claim: detached, value-free, rigorous empirical methodology

Feminist economists contest this claim to neutrality;

critique devaluation of alternative models and methods and mainstream emphasis of rigor over **social relevance**

Instead:

- qualitative methods, archival research, **mixed methods**
- Interdisciplinarity

(see [Kabeer 2019](#) on reading list)

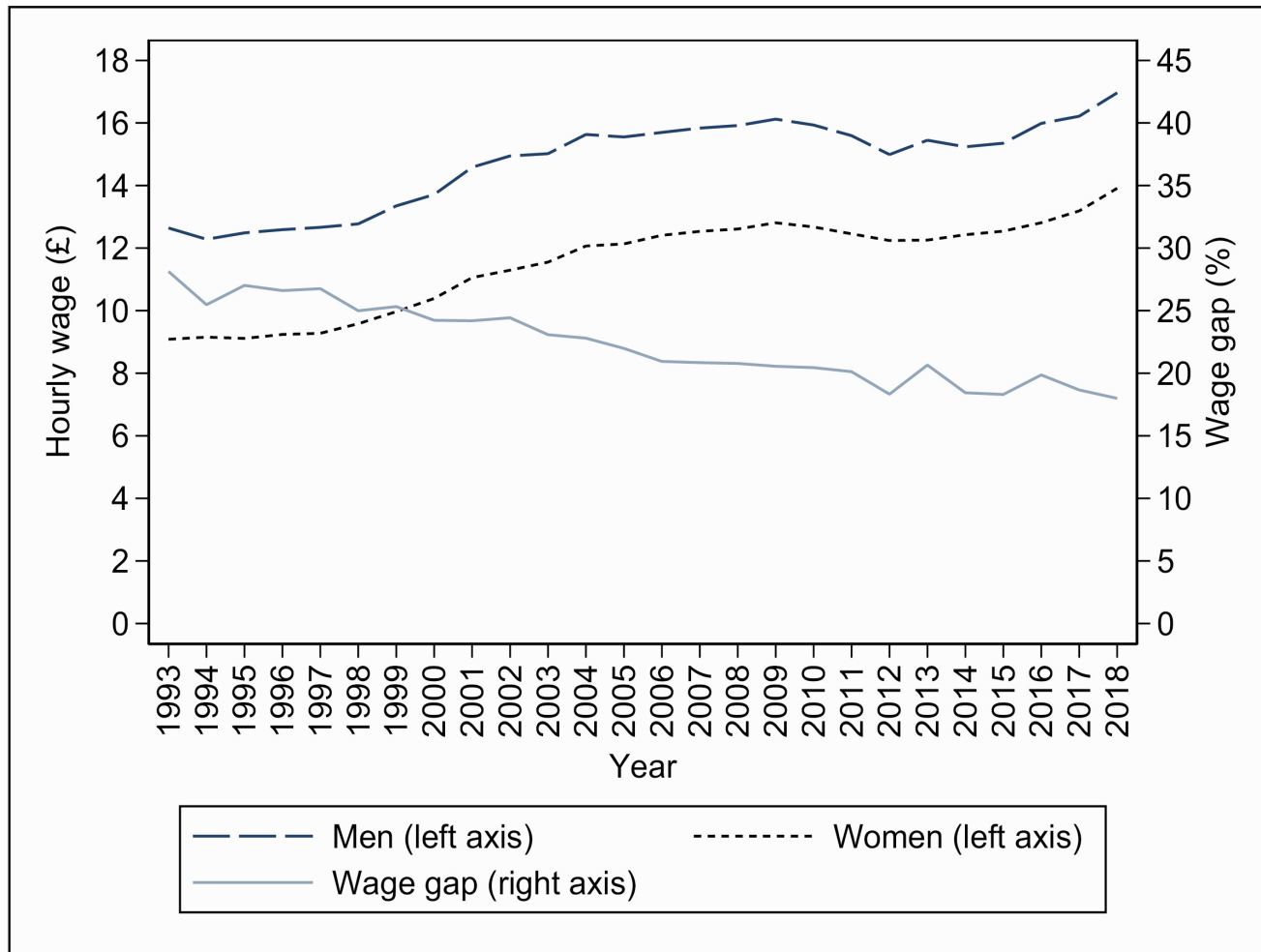


Bringing together debates
between feminist and other
economists on work, care,
preferences, and families:
the gender wage gap ...

The gender wage gap in the UK



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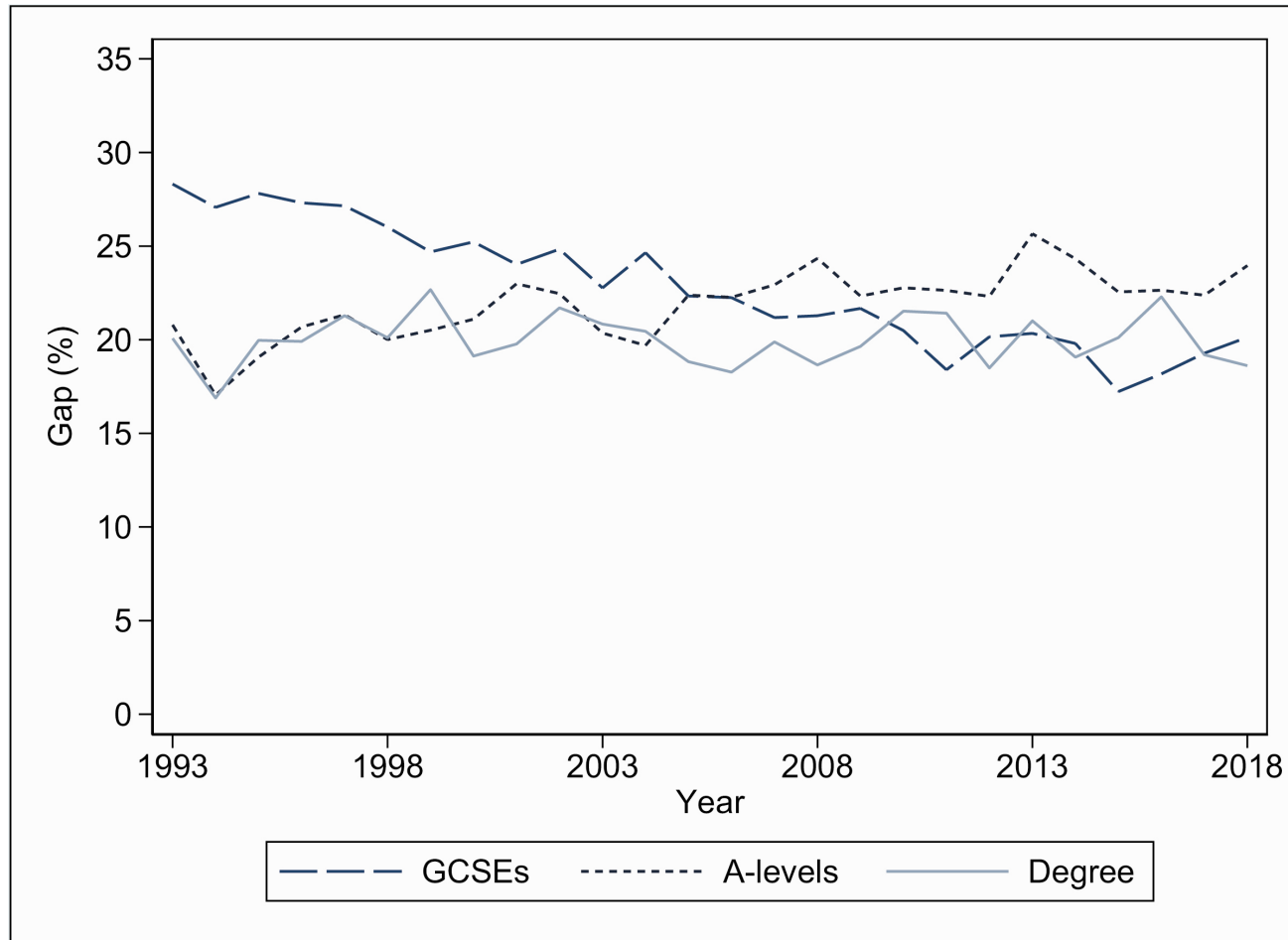


Source: Costa Dias et al. 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/graa053>). LFS 1993–2018. The gender wage gap is the percent difference in male and female average hourly wages.

By highest educational qualification ...



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Source: Costa Dias et al. 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/graa053>). LFS 1993–2018. The gender wage gap is the percent difference in male and female average hourly wages.



What could be some explanations for why women, on average, earn less than men?

Occupation and **industry** are now the biggest explanators of gender wage differences ([Blau and Kahn 2017](#) for the U.S.)

[Jewell et al. \(2020\)](#) find that **16%** of the gender wage gap in the U.K. is accounted for by **firms**:

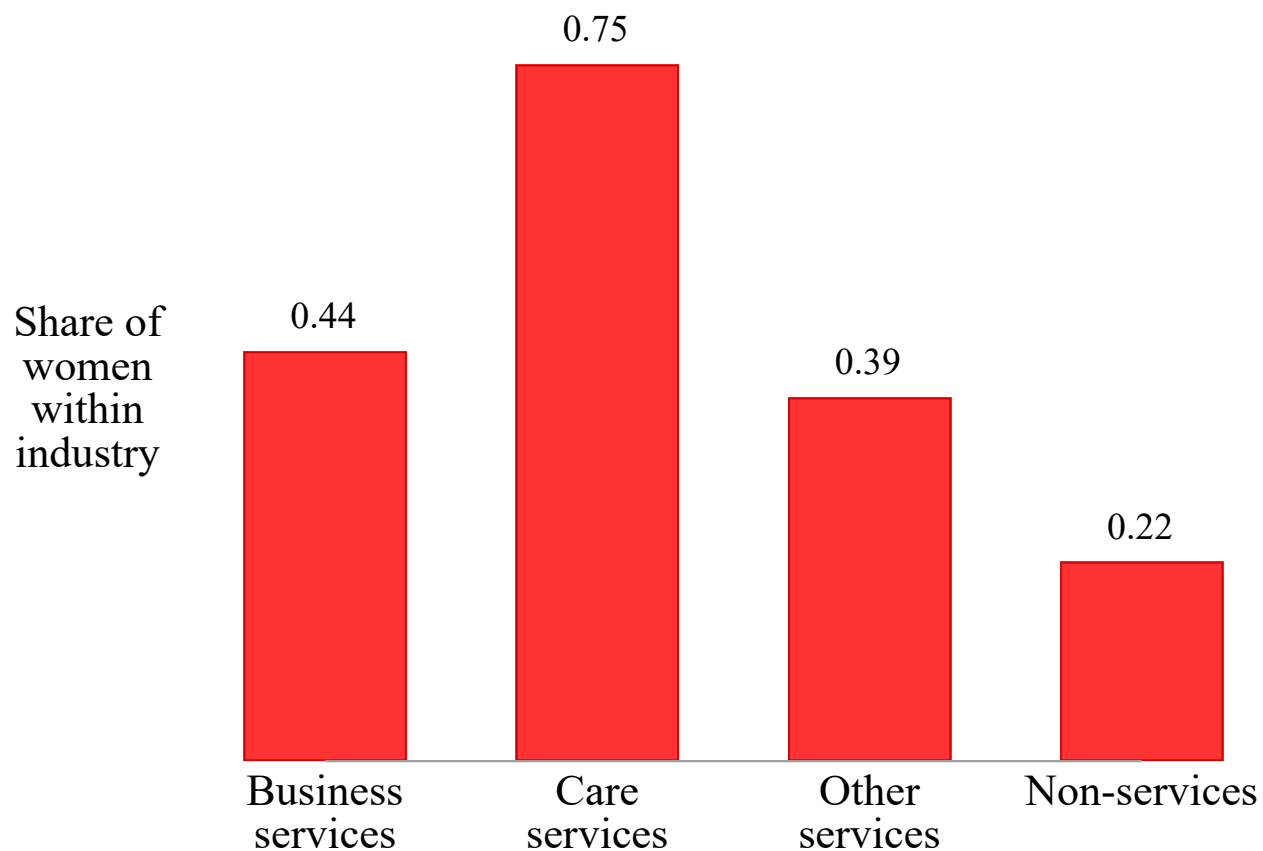
- Men locate in firms that pay higher wages to *all* their employees
- The equivalent contribution from occupations is just 6 percent.

Why does where you work matter so much for gender pay inequality?

Care sector employment



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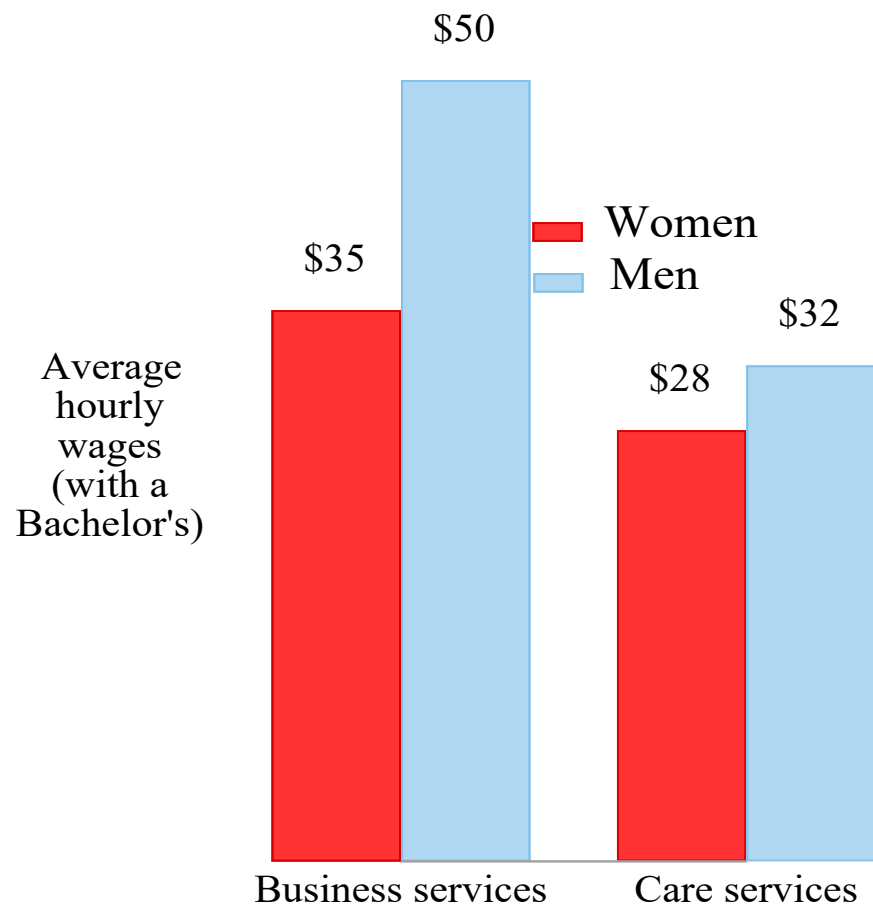


Source: Current Population Survey data for the U.S. from 2013-2019. Restricted to full-time, full-year, private sector employees.

Care sector penalties



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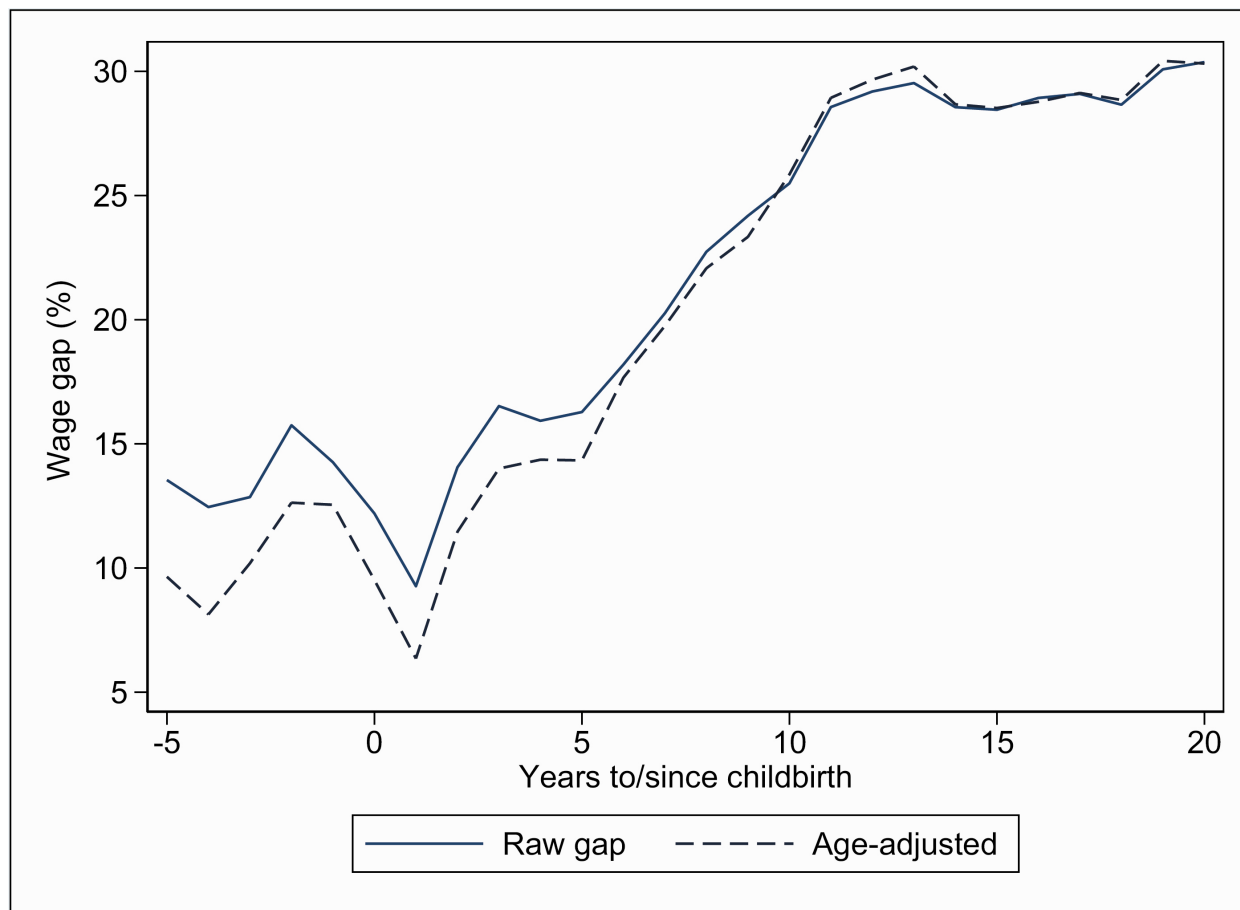


Why do care providers earn so little?

See [England and Folbre 1999](#) for early feminist theorizations of the cost of doing care work.

Source: Current Population Survey data for the U.S. from 2013-2019. Restricted to full-time, full-year, private sector employees.

Gender wage gap by birth of first child in the UK



Source: Costa Dias et al. 2021 (<https://doi.org/10.1093/oxrep/graa053>). LFS 1993–2018. The gender wage gap is the percent difference in male and female average hourly wages.



“markets work efficiently and therefore ... if some groups earn systematically less than others, it must be because they are less productive, or because they have chosen jobs that are more pleasant or flexible and therefore pay less” (Lundberg, p. 11)

For example:

- Care jobs pay less because they satisfy social/altruistic preferences (compensating differentials)
- Mothers are paid less because they choose flexible jobs or because they are less productive
- Women specialize in childcare and men in paid work because of comparative advantage (therefore maximize household welfare) (Becker)



Feminist interventions on debates on **the gender gaps** in the **labor market**:

Compensating differentials vs. care penalties

Human capital theory vs. devaluation of “feminine” jobs/tasks

Specialization: “comparative advantage” or social norms?



“A woman would need to be over 100 times more productive in market work than her male partner before reaching expected parity in domestic work” (Siminski and Yetsenga 2022)

- If specialization cannot be explained by comparative advantage, what role do norms and bargaining play?
- How do these norms change?
- Who should bear the costs of children?



This brings us back to how feminist economists think about **unpaid care**:

- Is the cost of children a matter for policy – that is, should the state support parents?
- Is raising children private consumption or a public good?
- **Beyond costs**: does unpaid care contribute to living standards? If yes, how best to measure these contributions?



Unpaid work, income, and household living standards



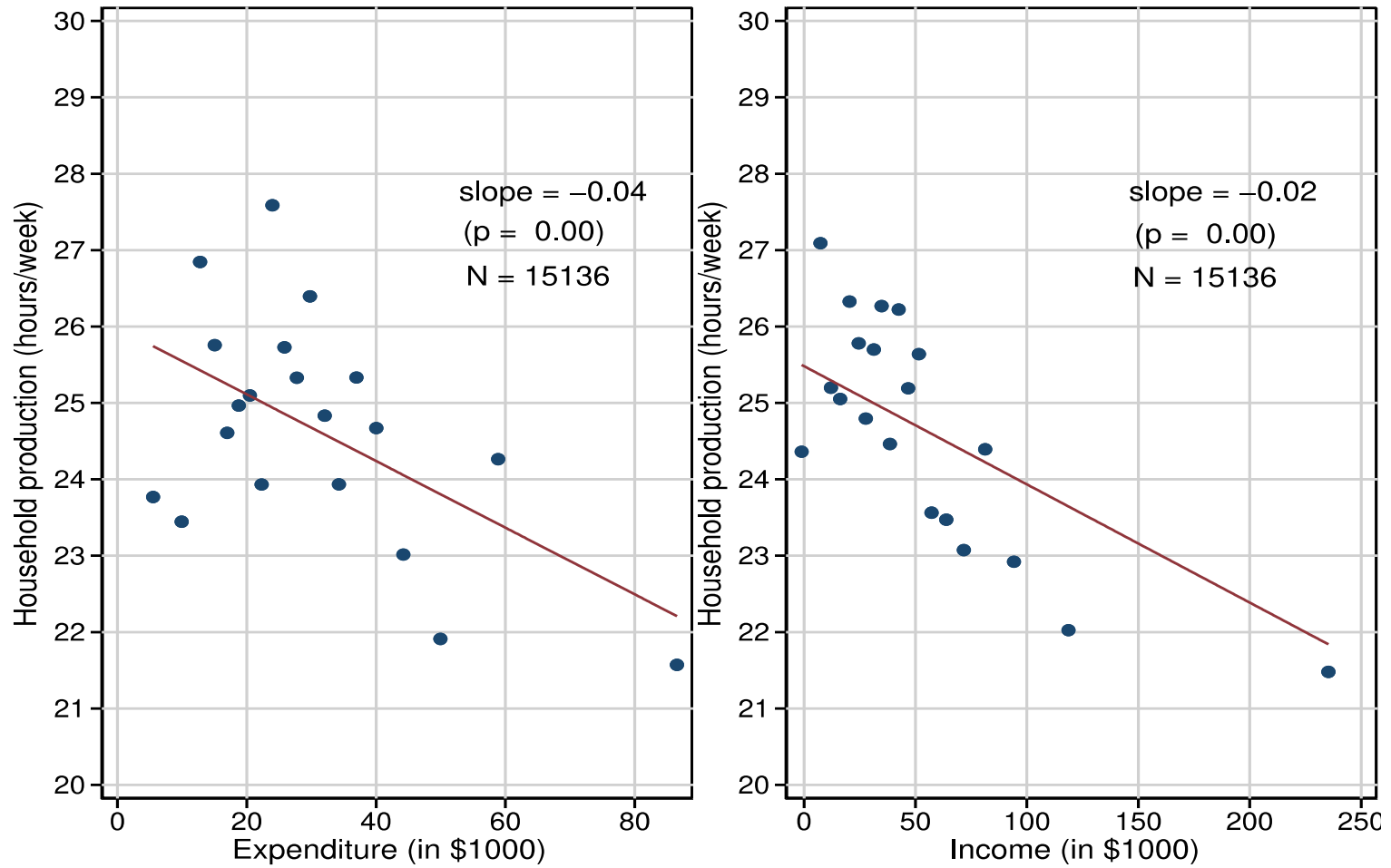
Most measures of living standards use **money incomes**:

- Consider two-adult families with two children in the U.S.: on average, dual-earner families earn **\$151,000** annually, compared to **\$130,000** for the single-earner ones
- Yet the latter spend **44** hours more per week on household production.

Source: The Panel Study of Income Dynamics, 2017 and 2019. Household production defined as time devoted to housework, shopping, and childcare. Single (dual)-earner defined as only one (both) member(s) employed 40+ hours/week.



Income is a biased proxy for living standards UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS



Binned scatterplot of equivalized household production on equivalized family income and expenditures, with linear regression conditioning on region and metropolitan area. *Source*: Pooled PSID 2017 and 2019, family cross-sectional weights used. Sample restricted to families with at most two adults.

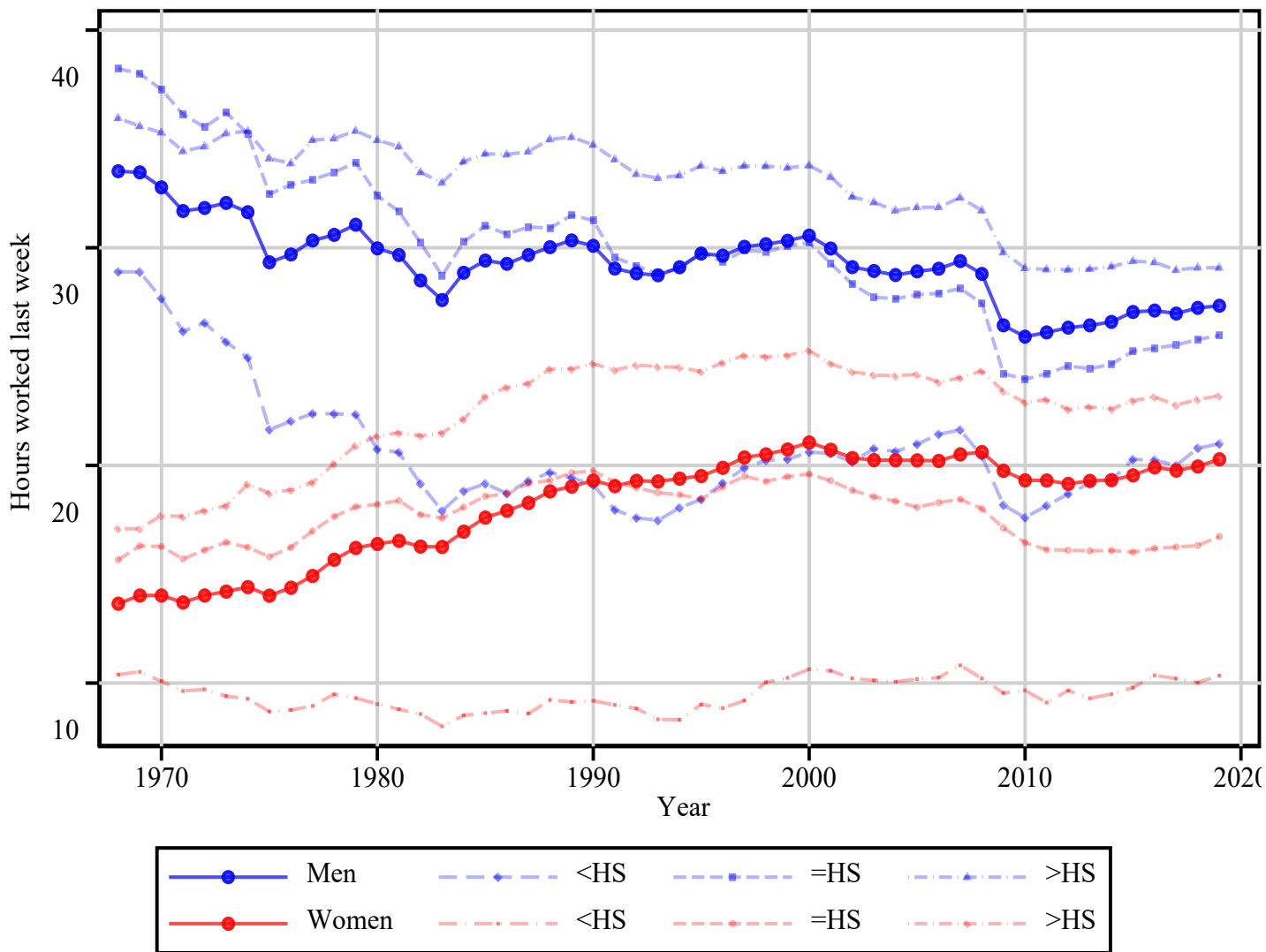
How **substitutable** are different types of household production with money?

(Women's) unpaid work **buffers** income inequality across households:

- Has household production **fallen** over time as women take up paid work?
- Are there differences in this decline across the income **distribution**?
- Has women's unpaid work also buffered the rise in inequality in the last 50 years?

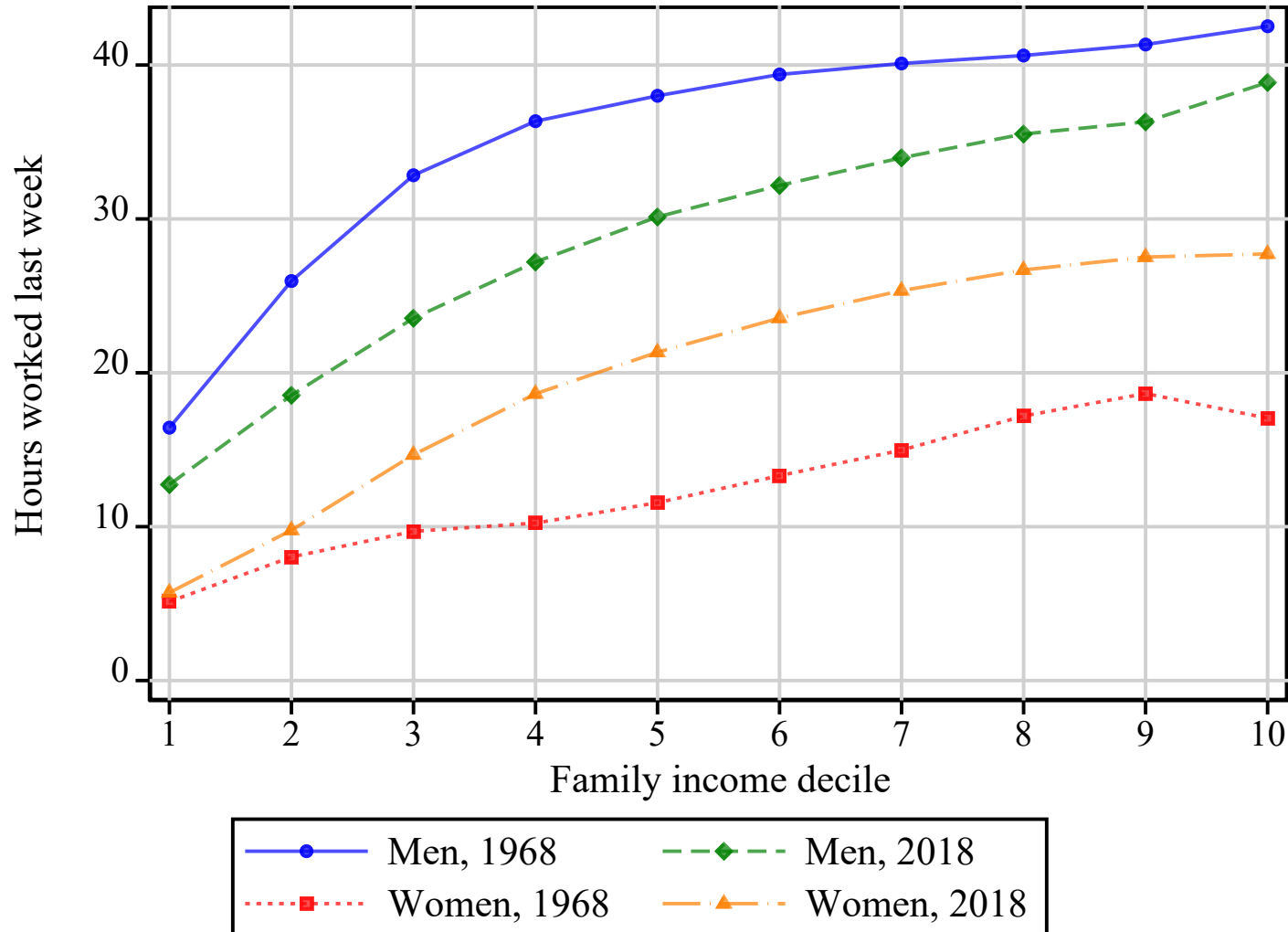


Women's paid work has risen



Source: CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), ages 20-60.

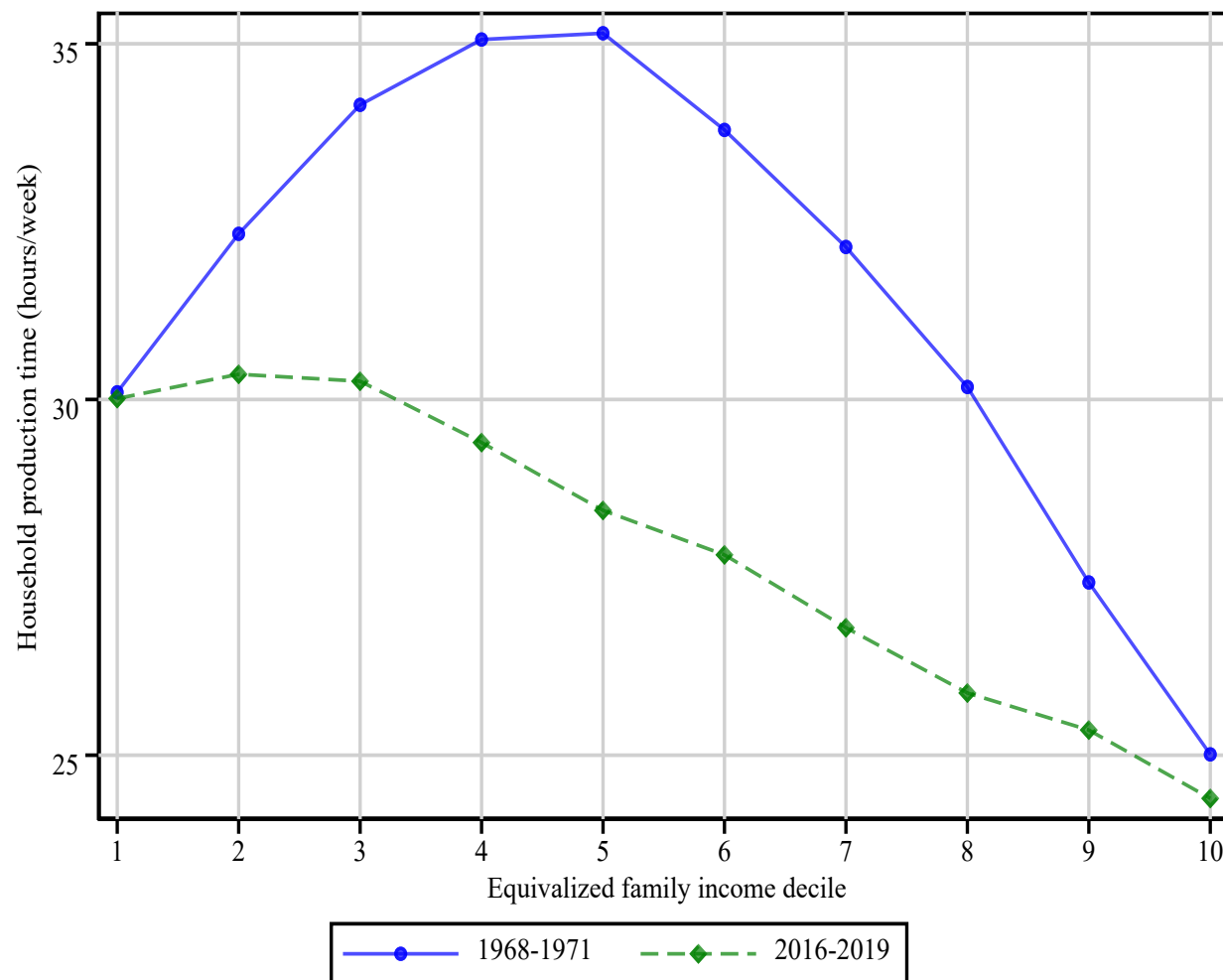
.... but more so at the middle



Source: CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), ages 20-60, married person with spouse present in the household. To ensure sufficient sample size, we pool the years 1968-1971, and 2016-2019.



.... with the biggest declines in household production

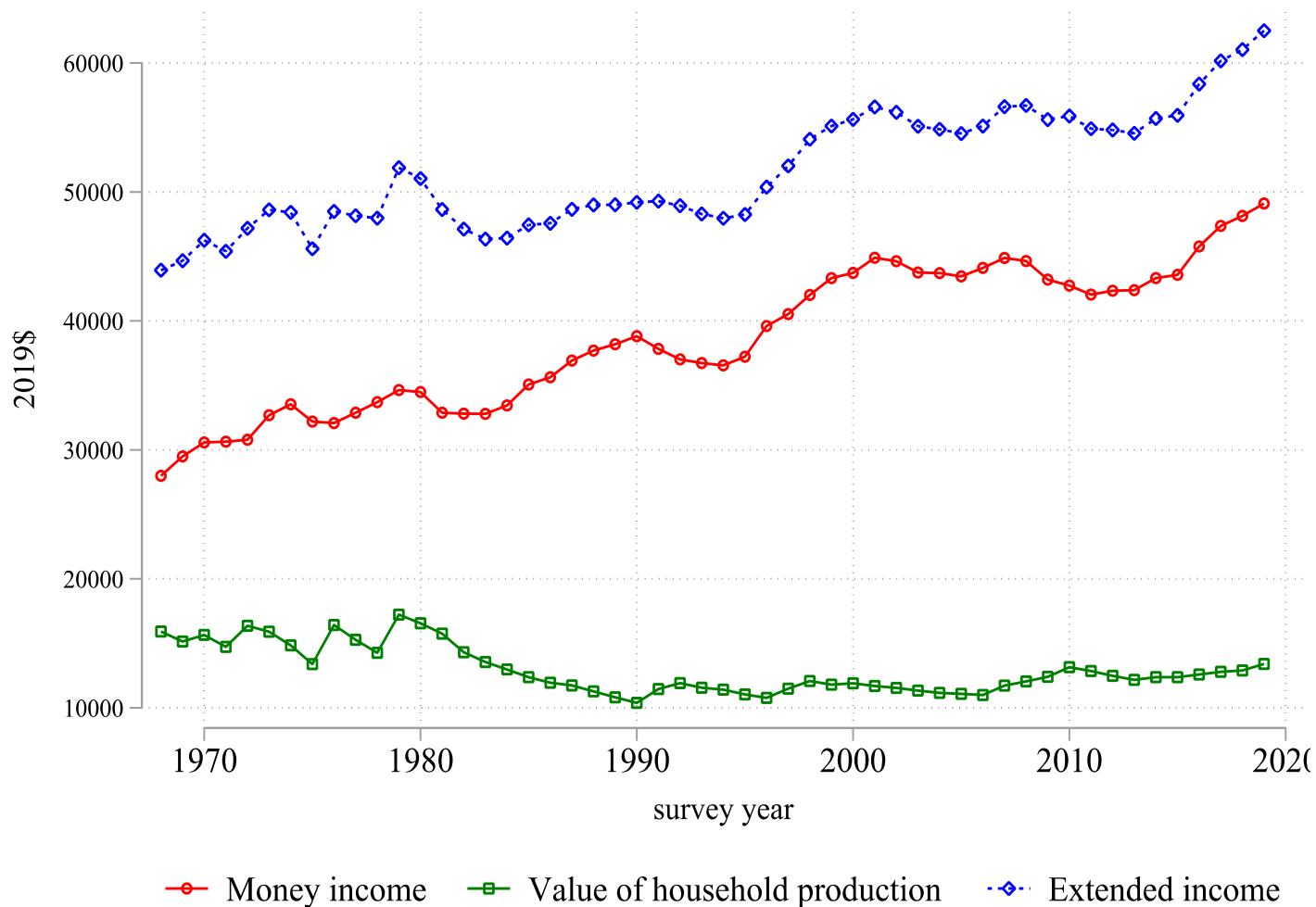


Source: CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), ages 20+. Household production includes housework, active childcare, and in-your-care (supervision) time. Imputed using data from the ATUS 2003-2019. Incomes equalized using the OECD scale $(1 + 0.7(A - 1) + 0.5K)$ and household production by the Folbre-Murray-Close-Suh (2016) scale $((A + 2K)^{0.5})$.

Extended incomes rise slower

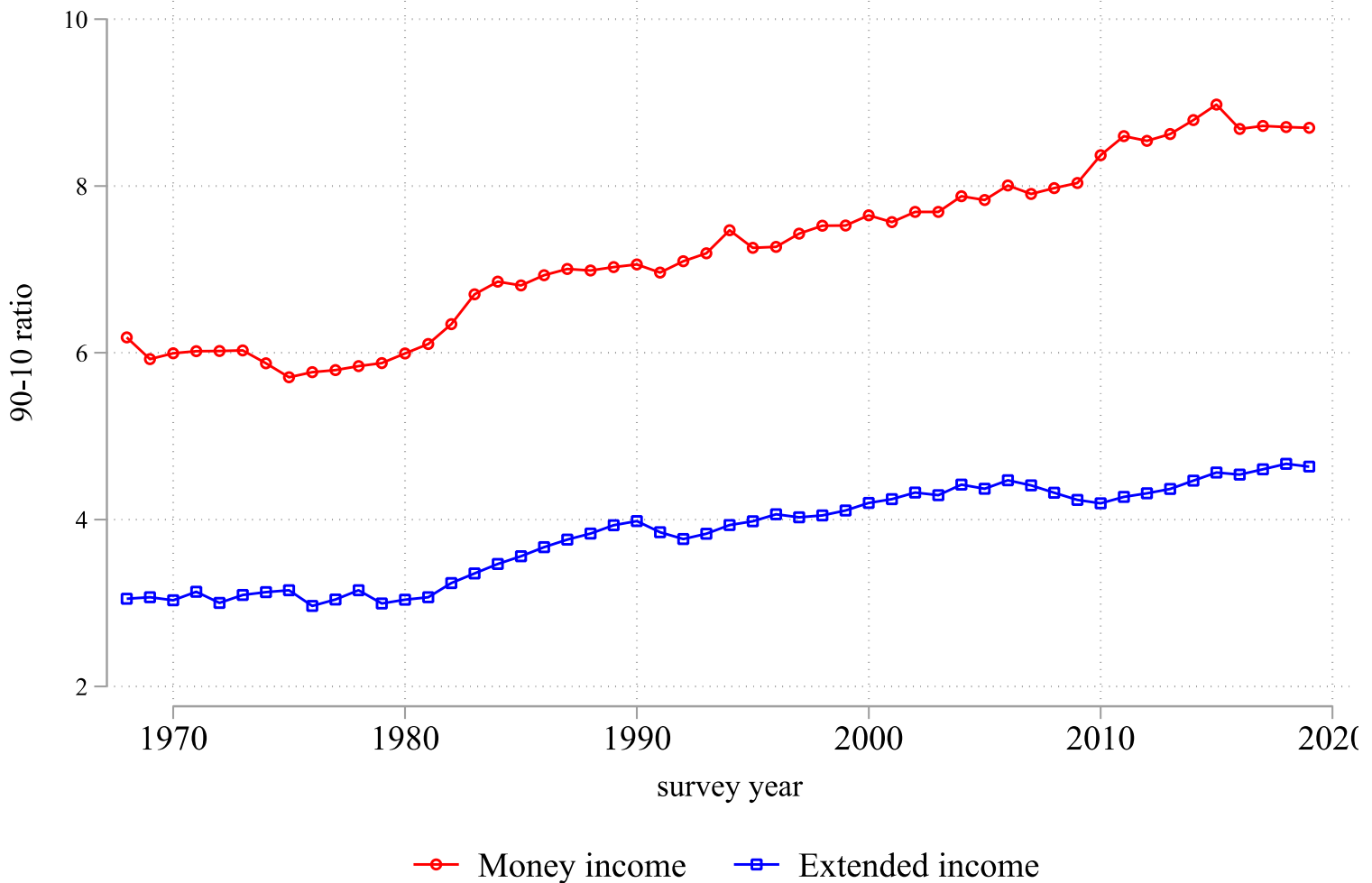


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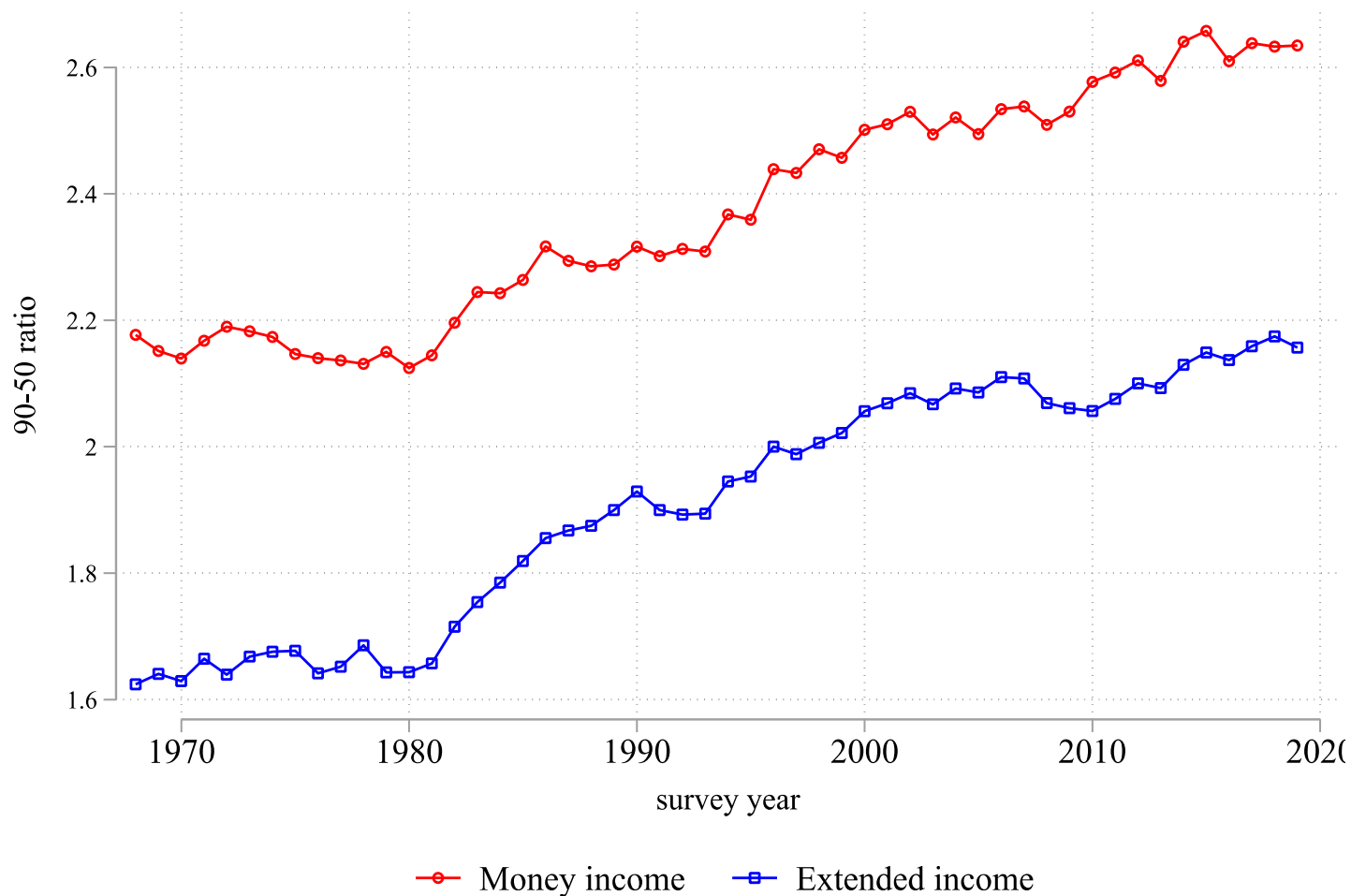
Source: CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), ages 20+. Extended income defined as the sum of market income and the value of household production. Household production valued at state-level minimum wages (for respective time period and location).

... and are less unequal



Source: CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), ages 20+. Extended income defined as the sum of market income and the value of household production. Household production valued at state-level minimum wages (for respective time period and location).

But not at the top half!



Source: CPS Annual Social and Economic Supplement (ASEC), ages 20+. Extended income defined as the sum of market income and the value of household production. Household production valued at state-level minimum wages (for respective time period and location).



Absence of a single, consistent data source to study the **joint distribution of money and household production** over time.

But, trends across various (imperfect) sources point to similar conclusions:

Inequality in extended income **lower** than for money income in the cross-section

Decline in household production over time

Rise in inequality in extended incomes slightly smaller than for money incomes ...

.. largely because living standards at the middle rise more slowly (or not at all) when we look at extended rather than money incomes

A recap



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What is unique about feminist economics?

- Individual preferences shaped by norms, in turn the product of policies and collective action
- Household decisions are the product of bargaining—power matters
- Work includes unpaid *and* paid work
- Important to measure and value unpaid work
- Pluralism in methods

Feminist macroeconomics

- Macroeconomic processes/policies have gendered impacts
- Care and national income accounting
- Integrating care into macroeconomic models

How to theorize economic crises and what prescriptions for policy?

- Gender-differentiated impacts of crises
- Feminist critique and alternatives for macroeconomic policy

A hypothetical scenario ...



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The UK government wants to direct public spending towards policies that will increase **employment** and economic **growth**. It considers cutting back on SureStart centres (public nurseries for children under 4) saving £5 billion a year. These funds are then spent on transportation infrastructure that will complement and increase private sector investment.

How do you think this would affect overall employment, female employment, and economic growth?



Addresses invisibility of unpaid care work in national income accounting

- Ignoring the value of unpaid work (as does GDP) misrepresents growth—misleading metric for policy choice
- E.g., overestimating production gains when women increase their labor force participation
- Recent SNA revisions include unpaid production of goods but not services.



Integrates care into macroeconomic models

- Care (also called social reproduction) is central to economic structures and processes, especially through role in the production and maintenance of the labor force
- In practice, integrating gender relations and the care sector into **post-Keynesian** models

How do rising market participation and wages for women interact with economic growth?

It depends on:

- how the **income distribution** influences aggregate demand
- whether women's rising market participation accompanied by **greater sharing of unpaid work**
 - influences the production of **human capital**
 - human capital enhances long-run production capacities and hence growth



Close links of feminist macroeconomics with post-Keynesian economics, but:

1. both **class and gender relations** matter for effective demand, output, and growth
2. recognizes **supply-side constraints** (via unpaid work and care) in addition to effective demand
3. economic growth is not the only **metric** of assessing policy success—broader wellbeing matters

Note mainstream overlap



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“Human capital includes **education**, training, **medical care**, and other additions to knowledge and health ...” (Gary Becker, Nobel Prize Lecture: “The Economic Way of Looking at Life”, 1992)

“... investing in human capital is akin to investing in physical capital ... **one can invest in the human factor of production with the expectation of economic returns just as one can invest in the factor of production physical capital.**” (Flabbi and Gatti, “A primer on human capital,” World Bank Policy Research Paper, 2018)

But key differences remain.

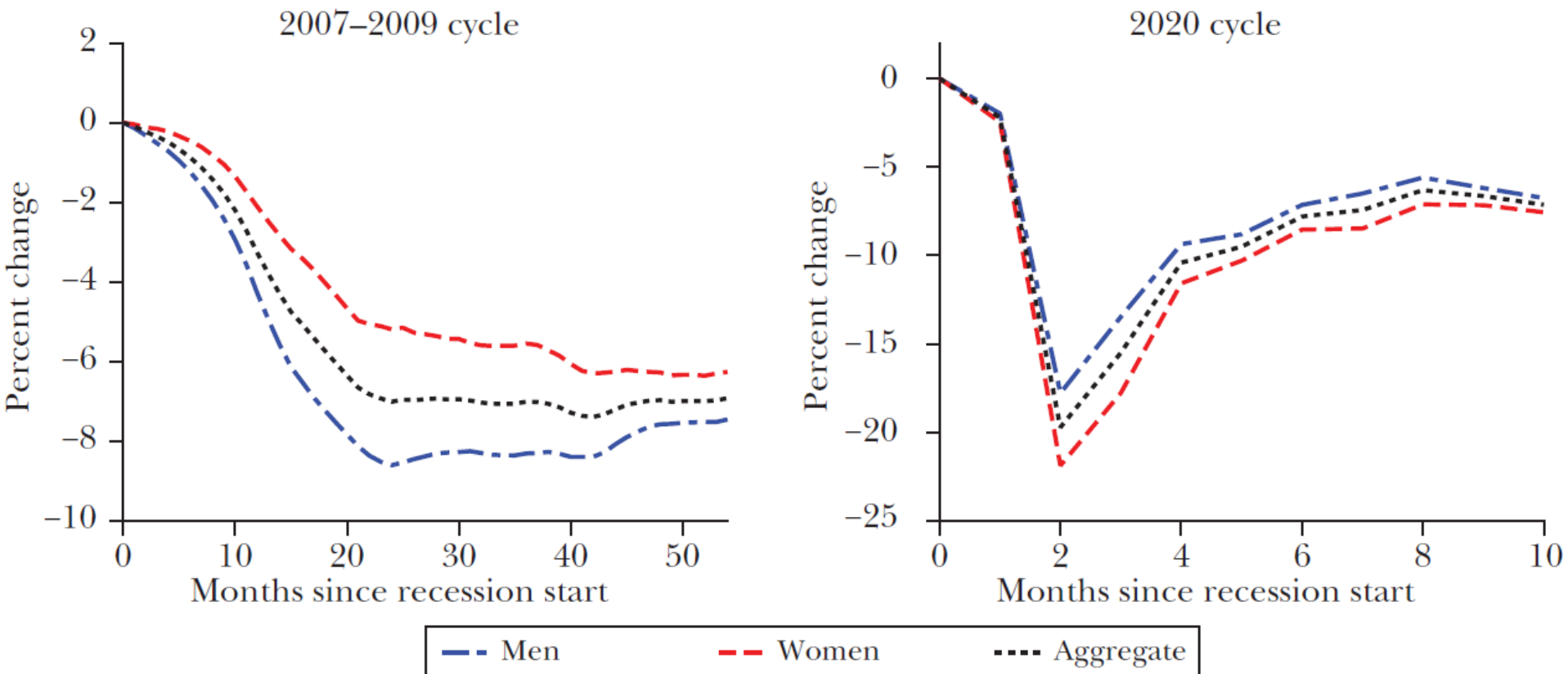


The initial impacts of the GFC (2008-2010) hit male employment much harder in both the U.K. and the U.S. In contrast, we observe the reverse during the 2020-2021 economic downturn, with women's employment declining by as much—or more—than men's employment.

Why do you think this was the case?



Employment rate in the U.S. for GFC- vs. COVID-induced economic crises



Source: Albanesi and Kim (2021).



Feminist economists argue that:

- Crises have uneven impacts across sectors
- Gender segregation of jobs across sectors may either protect or expose women to job loss
- Women's job loss also depends on the **nature** of the economic shock and the **policy** response that follows

“Feminist economics ... shows that decisions about economic policies, including determination of where investment is increased and where it is withdrawn, which services will flourish and which will be run down, and whose living standards will be protected or boosted, and whose reduced, **are not gender neutral**, even though they may make no explicit reference to gender.”

(Elson and Pearson, 2015; see also analysis by the U.K. Women’s Budget Group)



Policy metrics focused narrowly on GDP/economic growth (exclude social and ecological concerns)

Austerity policies (e.g., 2010-2013 in the U.K.) with detrimental impacts on both social reproduction/care provision and gender equality

Public investment focuses on physical infrastructure (communication, transport, utilities) over social infrastructure (education, health, and social care classed as “consumption”)

1960s: the rise of Becker's New Home Economics

1970s: feminist critiques of mainstream treatments of labor market discrimination and household division of labor

1980s: feminist critique (of mainstream theory *and* method) consolidates

1990s: institutional home: **International Association For Feminist Economics (IAFFE)** formed in 1992; *Feminist Economics* journal 1995

Influences

Marxist political economy and socialist feminist critiques of Marx

Capabilities tradition (Sen, Nussbaum)

Intersectionality

Institutional economics (Veblen)



Thanks!

Questions?

Also email me:

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