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Gender and Everyday Water Use in Los Angeles
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By Megan Baker

ucla center for the study of women
35
35 Years of Research that Rethinks

UCLA Sustainable LA Grand Challenge

ABOUT THE PROJECT: GENDER AND EVERYDAY WATER USE IN LOS ANGELES HOUSEHOLDS

This working paper series presents preliminary results from the Gender and Everyday Water Use in Los Angeles Study. Conducted by researchers at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women with the support of a Sustainable LA Grand Challenge Grant, this project investigates the important but understudied role of gender—as it intersects with race and class—in residential water use in Los Angeles. The goal of reducing residential water use requires nuanced understanding the ways that people use, think about, and value water. In the context of international development, policymakers and researchers understand that gender shapes water, especially because women and children are disproportionately responsible for procuring water. In the United States, feminist scholars long have found that divisions of labor and decision-making are often gendered. Putting together these two bodies of knowledge, along with the fact that women have led many American water struggles, from Standing Rock to Flint to Compton, it is surprising that gender remains largely absent from water management and water research in the U.S. This study found that women disproportionately are responsible for the household management of water and for its use in households. It connects everyday life to the large-scale questions of water scarcity and management that face our world in the twenty-first century.

Myths of Fifty-Fifty: Household Water Use & Gendered Divisions of Labor in Los Angeles

by Megan Baker

> *"But I try to make it clean and he always pitches in, 'What can I do?' I think there's some ingrained stuff in there, but generally we split it fifty-fifty."*

When a team member and I climbed the stairs to doctoral student Carolyn's[1] duplex one August afternoon, we found the household in a tizzy of preparation for her upcoming wedding. Halfway through our interview about her household's water usage, Carolyn responded to a question about a possible gendered division of labor within their home by recounting a moment of friction over household responsibilities. It all began with laundry. Before moving into the duplex together, Carolyn had offered to let her fiancé do his laundry at the duplex rather than a laundromat, since she had an in-home washer and dryer. Eventually, to streamline the process, Carolyn decided to simply do his laundry for him. But after he moved in, things seemed to devolve.

> *I did this weird thing where I suddenly became my mother. I was cooking, I was cleaning, I was doing the dishes, I was doing the laundry. It was like I was doing everything. Without even knowing it, I became my mother. And she was a stay-at-home mom. So her job was raising children, taking care of my father, keeping house. That was her job. And without even knowing it, I turned into her and then I just fell apart.*

Carolyn concluded that after this particular instance, her fiancé rushed to rectify the situation and the couple rearranged their household tasks along more equitable lines. Everyone does their own laundry now. Responsibility for maintaining the cleanliness of each room was divided between the two. Since Carolyn is the "klutz" in the kitchen, she charged herself with cleaning the kitchen while her fiancé cleans the bathroom. She noted that her fiancé is adamant about taking out the trash, even though Carolyn says she is "perfectly capable" of doing it herself. But as Carolyn's first statement above indicates, she positions herself as the manager of the household.

1. Pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the identities of study participants.

She "makes" the home clean while her fiancé "pitches in." As I considered this statement along with her list of household tasks that she had described over the course of the interview, I wondered to myself: is household management not *also* a form of labor on top of her share of responsibilities of cooking the meals Monday through Friday, cleaning the kitchen, and washing the dishes? It seemed like a lot of tasks. Carolyn seemed to frame this long list of chores as a consequence of her being the messy member of the couple. Sometimes her fiancé would get after her about picking up the things she habitually left lying around the apartment. By the time Carolyn finished narrating how labor in their household came to be divided, I was struck by the feeling that this was decidedly not a fifty-fifty division of labor. Nevertheless, I politely smiled and moved on with the interview, unaware that I would have the same feeling in response to similar data multiple times over the course of this project.

In the UCLA Center for the Study of Women and Sustainable LA Grand Challenge 'Gender and Everyday Household Water Use in Los Angeles' study, almost all participants with mixed gender households were quick to affirm that there was nothing gendered about the way they organized their households. However, the data collected says otherwise. Nevertheless, participants' insistence upon a non-gendered rationale for findings of gendered water usage in their households was striking. Whether over the course of an interview or in their four days of water diary recordings, participant households laid out unequal divisions of labor that fell along gender lines—women often did the majority of household labor and this made them the users of more water. When participants realized that they had contradicted themselves in the presence of research team members, they quickly explained away and rationalized why household responsibilities might appear unequal between the men and women of the household. According to participants, the idiosyncrasies of each particular couple shaped how household labor was divided. Some claimed to have personal preferences about which chores they did and how often: A was home more, B liked things cleaned a certain way, C was a better cook, D preferred to do certain chores. What might appear to be a gendered division of labor to our researchers was merely coincidental. But rather than take participants' explanation of individual preference as the root cause for their household's "gendered" division of labor at face value, this paper highlights how gender undergirds household arrangements and the significance of this for household water—the "some ingrained stuff" that Carolyn pointed out.

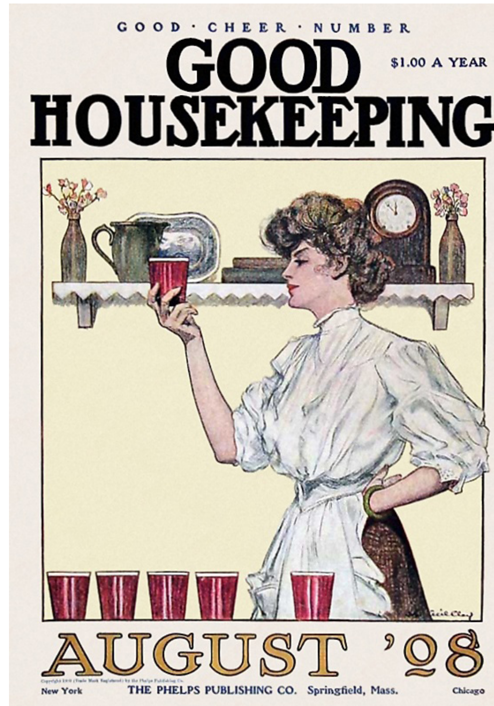
The slippage between a presumed existence of gender equality and a particular household's actual division of labor seemed to provoke anxiety in members of the household about how they appeared to researchers. During home visits and interviews, when it became clear that there was something gendered about the way that a participant household divided up their tasks, participants often went on the defensive and tried to rationalize our observations. These moments serve as analytical points of entry that grapple with responses that our study team found to be an indicative of an *ideological commitment to the notion of household gender equality*. In turn, this paper considers and analyzes the salience of this ideological commitment and how a desire to actualize gender equality in households influenced the interactions that members of the study team encountered throughout the processes of conducting this study. The moments in which couples asserted gender equality within their relationships and home indicate moments of an underlying anxiety and tension. These instances during interviews provide a fruitful opening for us to consider the structures of social organization of a modern city like Los Angeles. Thus, in this paper, I ask: what produces these moments of anxiety, of hasty assurances, of adamant denial of how gender influences our lives as residents of Los Angeles? How is it that something so seemingly disconnected from gender—household water use—could be shaped by gender? What is the relationship among gender, the household, and the present-day economy at large and what does this tell us about American social organization, at large?

Drawing upon our data from thirty-six Los Angeles households as well as reflection on the process of conducting the 'Gender and Everyday Household Water Use in Los Angeles' research project, this paper identifies three key findings in regard to gendered divisions of household labor. Data from our project illustrates: 1) women conduct the majority of tasks involving water usage, and thereby often the majority of household labor; 2) participants often denied that the reason for this finding was gender

inequality or even gender differentiation; and 3) perhaps most importantly, gender is still a relevant and necessary mode of analysis because gender can explain how households divide up their labor and enable the economy.

Gender and Labor Over Time

In a political moment marked by nation-wide women's marches, women's pay equality movements, and #MeToo, the general American public is increasingly grappling with the reality that the gender equality movements of the twentieth century failed to instigate change across all facets of society. In this context, people who may have assumed that gender equality had come to fruition are realizing that this is not actually the case. Conducting this study show us that the household is just one site in which we can see this collective social realization play out in the course of an interview. Over the course of conducting interviews for this project, moments of disconnect and discomfort about gender—like that which I experienced with Carolyn—continually reemerged. These moments became particularly memorable because they revealed that a discussion of gender was prone to affect either the interviewer, respondents, or both. Ironically, talking about gender, which is itself so based upon prescriptive ideas of the body, invoked bodily responses. When I served as the lead interviewer, I had to pay acute attention to my own facial expressions and strove to respond in ways that did not convey any particular feeling about participants' responses. In the careful management of how I embodied the position of interviewer, I noticed a pattern in which I braced myself before asking the "gender question" in our prepared roster of interview questions. Other team members also did not seem immune to this feeling. When observing the sole male team member interviewing participants, I found it hard to miss his slight hesitancy prior to asking the gender question or his sometimes-rushed manner of asking the question. Other team members who accompanied him on interviews also noticed these subtle aspects of his interviewing demeanor. Explicitly asking a participant about gender and household division of labor could change the tenor and dynamic of an interview in an instant—and it did, multiple times. Aside from the formal data we collected, these observations and unexpected moments in the process of conducting our study indicate a general discomfort regarding gender and the household.



Good Housekeeping, 1908

To begin to explain the simultanous aversion to discussing gender and denial of gendered division of labor expressed by study participants, I will briefly consider the enduring salience of scholarship on gender, labor and the household. Feminist scholars continually revisit the development of the public/private divide and the ways that gender saturates it, exploring how it has been understood over time and drawing attention to the ways that women's labor exploitation has been naturalized over time. To understand how and why women have been made synonymous with the home and why women's labor is valued less than men's, it is important to situate and consider these relations within economic systems as they structure social relations. Marxist feminists have long argued that women's exploitation is central to capitalist accumulation largely because women have been the producers and reproducers of labor-power (Dalla Costa and James 1975). Women's ability to reproduce labor made them and their bodies a target for management by men. In her examination of the development of capitalism and its transformation both of women's social position and the production of labor-power, Silvia Federici (2004) argues that gender serves as a critical class formation, for women's labor was rendered exploitable. Reviewing capitalism's transitions over time, she finds that the demonization of women allowed for the violent reformulation of women's political authority and social value in order to alienate them from their labor. Through her study of witch-hunts, Federici shows how they were used as a method of social control. Using violence to retaliate against women who exhibited sociality with one another and asserted their knowledge helped to

enforce the idea that women's interactions should stay within the home, where they should care for their nuclear family. This move to confine women's labor to the household not only circumscribed their sociality with one another but also their sovereignty over their own bodies and the labor that they produce. Making women subservient to men served to transfer possession of women's labor to the men in their lives.

Similarly, in considering the relationship between citizenship and labor in the United States specifically, sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn (2004) identifies independence as a key value that signifies that an individual is in charge of their own labor. In the United States, independence has been crafted into the domain of men, while it remains limited for women and members of non-white racial groups. For racialized women, the difficulty of gaining independence over one's labor is compounded. The separation of genders and races has been enshrined in the law, further normalizing inequality as part of organizing the economy and social life. Women's work within the home has been historically instituted and entrenched over time, revealing the difficulty of achieving or actualizing gender equality today.

Managing a Household

In our study, when households included at least one woman and/or a woman managed household labor, those women had a major influence on participation. Often, the person who reached out to the study team about possible participation in the study was the person who took the charge of getting family members to participate as well. Their management determined who within households participated in our study and, subsequently, our understanding of household dynamics. Participants, particularly women of middle and upper-classes, seemed to want to be seen as having an equitable division of labor within their households. They seemed to consider it unsatisfactory for the research team to have the impressions of a gendered division in which women did the housework and were responsible for working within the kitchen. But even study participation itself fell along particular gender lines.

The majority of participants who volunteered their households were women; women followed through with their participation and would even manage the water diaries on men's behalf. Often, in households with small children, women completed entries for them. If someone within the household did not complete the diary, it was typically a male. In Carolyn's household, she was the only one to complete a water diary. Carolyn stated that her fiancé had just returned from a business trip and he did not have the time to do so. Although we emphasized our interest in the data from the both of them, Carolyn seemed resigned to her fiancé's incompletion of the water diary. Additionally, Carolyn had been the one to reach out to us and indicated a concern about water and living in Los Angeles in multiple instances over the course of our two separate visits to her home. As our team reflected on Carolyn's interview, it was apparent that Carolyn was upholding her household by doing the bulk of the household labor, despite her claim that responsibilities were split fifty-fifty in her household.

In the Thomas household in Beverly Hills, Louisa knew everything about her household and managed it with a careful eye and precision. She and her husband Simon are a white couple in their seventies and eighties. A family friend, Richard, was staying in the household as an international student in order to complete an internship. It seemed Louisa compelled them both to participate. She recalled the exact dates when Richard had arrived and would leave to return home. Louisa was aware of the ongoing efforts to decrease household water usage across Los Angeles, as well as the Beverly Hills-specific guidelines. When the family was considering solar panels, Louisa did extensive research, "looking at these things like a hawk for years." Reflecting on water usage and lawns, Louisa alerted the interviewers to the heat pitfalls of Astroturf and explained that Mondo grass was an optimal choice because of its low water intake. When the family was asked what they thought might be the number one usage of water in the household, husband Simon suggested showers. Louisa quickly countered, asserting: "No, toilets. I became conscious about...when you're home all day, especially if I'm drinking, like, three gallons of water. (*laughs*) Because it's hot, there's a lot of toilet use." Although her husband technically paid the water bills, Louisa knew and monitored the bill amounts and costs. Louisa, who had identified herself as the one who did laundry the most in the household, noted that they had stopped changing the bed sheets every week in order to cut down their water usage. In passing, Louisa remarked that Richard "doesn't change

the sheets much." When Richard defends himself by saying that he changed his sheets "once every two weeks or something," both Simon and Louisa made their skepticism known. Nothing seemed to escape the notice of Louisa.

At the time of the study, the Thomas's one-story house was home to three individuals. The expansive home required regular care. The house had a pool and crews of hired workers that included gardeners and housecleaners. Although Louisa was not always home when the four housecleaners arrived to clean for an hour each day, Louisa had a strong sense of what they did. When the team members asked how the housecleaners worked, Louisa was surprisingly unable to recall if they did anything out of the ordinary or cleaned a way that she would not. She noted that if she had noticed something particularly wasteful about the cleaners' water usage, she would tell the "head guy" to ask them to do things differently. With her clear sense of what the cleaners did, Louisa was the obvious manager of the household and its daily operations.

Throughout the interview, when her husband would linger on an answer, going off-track ever so slightly, Louisa would gently push him to focus on the questions, since the interview was projected to be 1.5-2 hours. This practice was indicative of Louisa's awareness of the management of time and the dynamics between individuals in her household. When interviewers asked our standard question about a possible gendered division of labor in the household, Louisa's initial response was a simple, "everything's gendered." After reminding the interviewers that she was a feminist philosopher by occupation, Louisa took the question to reflect on the division of labor between her and Simon over the course of their relationship. Elaborating, Louisa stated, "Well! This has evolved over the years...Simon had a very traditional first marriage, but then he'd been…single." Continuing on, Louisa stated:

> *He is trainable, he's very trainable. So he'd basically... and he doesn't make a mess in the kitchen. I can live with mess a few hours longer. A few* days *longer, probably, than Simon could. So he does tend to clean up the... the dishes. And since Richard's been here, he's been... doing that, too. (*long pause*) The—the laundry, I do... anything that requires...taking care of my own clothes, because I know. His [clothes] don't need special care. Like, I don't want certain things put in the dryer, so I do things in the laundry, taking them out of the laundry, putting them in the dryer, and then he has—has to fold 'em.*

On account of his marriage to Louisa, Simon was made aware that gendered divisions of labor existed and that he should be more responsible for himself. Through Louisa's 'training', Simon amended his habits and eventually learned to clean the dishes. Meanwhile, Louisa learned to endure mess for longer than she previously would have. Through Louisa's narration, we can see how a gendered division of labor could be rectified. However, when these particular changes are seen within the larger context of household chore distribution between Louisa and Simon, there is still an uneven allocation of labor. Furthermore, it took Louisa's prodding and pushing to rectify the divide, another form of labor that she had to undertake to get to this point.

Taking the household as a unit of the economy, management is a huge task. In her 1989 study, Arlie Hochschild quoted women who noted the mental load of managing a household and ensuring that it worked as efficiently as possible. Such management is critical to the functioning of the household. In the Thomas household, Louisa, a meticulous and thorough household manager, took charge of responsibilities like managing the cleaners and tracking the cost of water, which enabled the rest of the family to carry on with the other parts of their lives, i.e. their careers. Although she and her husband were both at least semi-retired, Louisa still did a disproportionate share of the labor of household management. Her attentiveness made her cognizant of everything that happened, and she was constantly working to streamline the household's efficiency while conserving water. She followed the news and stayed updated with water conservation standards.

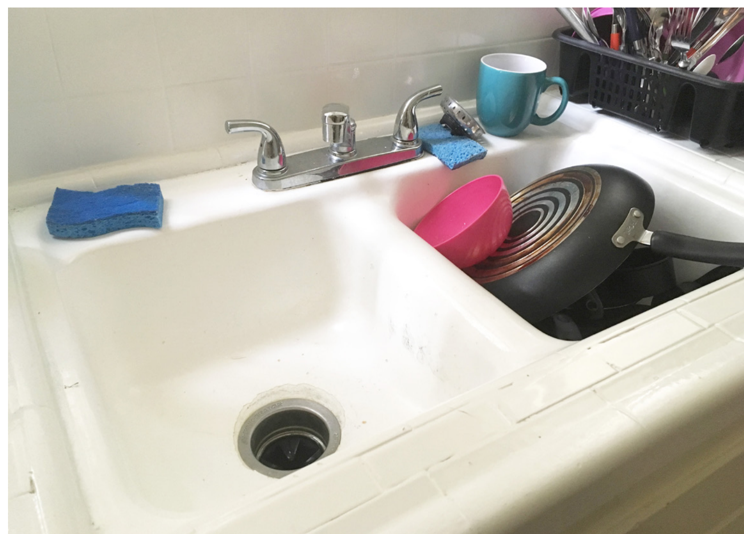
For Louisa, the feminist philosopher who was able to train her husband, arrangements were negotiated over time so that labor was increasingly (albeit still unequally) shared. Meanwhile, for Carolyn, the graduate student with upcoming nuptials and representative of a younger generation, this moment of negotiating household responsibility reorganization came prior to marriage. Whether an outcome of living together before marriage or indicative of the generational divide between Carolyn and Louisa, the fact that Carolyn was still the one who held the most responsibility for the household, even if just in the context of thinking about it on a more frequent

basis than her fiancé, reveals that the elimination of a gendered division of household labor is far from a reality.

The mother-son Camacho household offered a different take on the gendered division of labor—one grounded in their experiences as Latinos. The MacArthur Park apartment was home to Estefania, a case worker, and her son, who had recently moved back in with her. Estefania, who contacted the study team and convinced her son to participate, worked around his schedule to ensure he would be there for at least part of the interview before he left for his job as a restaurant manager. To make sure Justin would not be late for work, the study team breezed through the questions with Estefania's comments peppered in when questions pertained to both of them. At one point, Justin impatiently interrupted his mother's account of her pet fish Dory's recent death to move the interview along faster. Estefania and Justin had a clear rapport with one another. Justin presented himself as the exasperated son to a generous yet overbearing Latino mother, and made it evident that his mother was a keen household manager, which he surmised was a result of her upbringing in Mexico.

> **Estefania:** *Yeah, my mom will always say "turn off the lights, turn off the lights."*
> **Justin:** *My grandma has always been like that, light and water. It comes off naturally for them to want to save water. They grew up in a time where if they wanted to get hot they burn some wood, comparing with just turning on your faucet. I think it's like that in the Latino community, for me growing up I have always seen that at least. My friends and their parents too and maybe not their kids like us first generation kids. Like me. Sometimes I leave the water running, and you know, like to get my water ready before showering.*
> **Estefania:** *Yeah, I will be screaming "the water, the water!"*
> **Justin:** *And like "yeah, I know, I'll turn it off." She's always been on us about the water, since we were small.*
> **Estefania:** *If my mom were to be here, she will probably say 'oh why are those lights on people are so wasteful, turn them off.' And I guess from hearing it so much from her, I turned to be like her as well.*

Associating conservation with life in Mexico, Justin



identified this as the driving force for his mother and grandmother's water habits.[2] For Justin, growing up in the U.S. where there was drinkable water straight from the tap, water conservation was less of a concern, which explained his shower time average of twenty minutes. This, in turn, perhaps explained why he claimed the title of person who uses the most water in the household, despite the amount of household labor involving water undertaken by his mother. As a first generation American, Justin noted that he simply had a different set of expectations about water and access to it. Like Estela, another first-generation MacArthur Park resident who also lived with her mother and was interviewed by the team, Justin was under the impression that there is no running water in Mexico.[3] Estefania confirmed Justin's analysis, noting that that's just how life was when she grew up. Old habits were hard to break.

Perhaps Estefania's water-awareness was just an individual quirk that she developed growing up outside of the U.S. However, her concern about water was not isolated to her household. Later in the interview, Estefania remarked "it is true what my son said that I always scream to him about water when he's in the shower because my neighbors have mentioned it to me. Because even though we don't pay the bills, I do think a lot about the hot water because my neighbors will sometimes ask me if I have hot water. But I think about other families with kids." In a neighborhood

2. For more on the marginalization of immigrant women's expertise regarding water, see Nander 2019.
3. Estela expressed surprise that there were toilets in Mexico during the following exchange with members of her family and members of the research team:
Ana: How was the water usage back in Tijuana compared to here in LA?
Estela: Did you guys have toilets?
Maria: We have toilets over there!
Megan: You still have to go to the bathroom!
Estela: I've never been to Mexico! Ever! All I know about Mexico is rags and dirt, pot things for toilets and the river for shower.

where access to water is already limited, the building was accustomed to hot water shortages. So perhaps access to hot, running water might not be as reliable as Justin seemed to think, and the water inequalities that he ascribed to Mexico were realities in the very building in which he lived. Estefania was not only being mindful of water for her own household, but for other families as well, particularly those with children. As a person that other families in the building turned to, Estefania cultivated a consciousness that made it challenging for Justin to justify his own exorbitant showers.

Estefania managed monitoring Justin's long showers, handwashing some of her clothes, cleaning the house, washing dishes, and cooking, on a daily basis, and seemed content with the arrangement. Justin was one of the two participants who noted that there was indeed a distinct and enduring gendered division of labor in households—although Justin tied such a division of labor with being Latino. When asked about a tendency in their own—or others that they knew—where women were in charge of water, Justin responded:

> **Justin:** *Come on, that ain't no question, that's mandatory. I mean I'm not saying that stereotypes are not changing and the whole machismo is gone or still in play, but that's what it is. If you're speaking to an older generation, women do that. And it sucks nut. It is what it is. I assume for those gender roles, there's the same pressure from women to provide for the house. It's a give and give thing. I'm all for gender equality, but that means that we all go and does everything. You know, for a lot of these communities the women stay home and look out for their children. And it's like that in the old country, and that's what it is here. I think for us it's different, for our generation—like, for me and my girlfriend we put fifty and fifty on everything. But I just think that way it works better for everyone. But I know, like in my friend's households and everywhere I go, I ain't never seen no daddy clean. If so, maybe it might be the wife's birthday or something and he would wash the dishes, but other than that you never seen daddy mopping, you know? My mom is going to say no, but my dad died when I was ten years old so. But if you're honest about it, men have always been the ones providing in the Latino households, and women clean.*
> **Estefania:** *But you cook!*
> **Justin:** *Yeah, I like to cook, but overall you will see women do most of the cleaning and chores involving water but definitely I would say ninety percent of Latino households women do the most.*

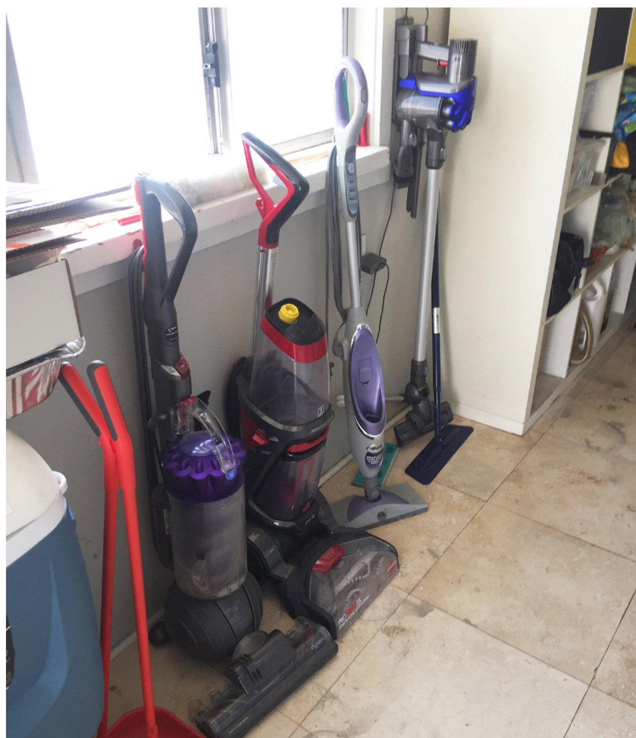
As Justin's response indicates, being in charge of water was immediately associated with household labor. Acknowledging that the bulk of household labor fell on women, Justin implied that it was justified given that "men have always been the ones providing in the Latino households." Using his experience with his girlfriend as a generational difference, Justin was able to explain away why a gendered division of labor existed. Meanwhile, Estefania's first response was to deflect. Because the conversation immediately moved to a discussion on the division of labor between Justin and his girlfriend, Estefania did not elaborate on the point any more.

Denial

Regina and Victor live together in a two-bedroom apartment in Koreatown. A pair of roommates used to live in one bedroom, but when they moved out, Regina and Victor converted the room into an office and now live in the place on their own. Initially, both were supposed to participate in the study. Regina, who signed them up, indicated during the home visit that both she and her partner would participate. Nevertheless, the team members who conducted the interview did not find out about Victor's withdrawal until Regina let them know a few hours before the interview. Given the design of the study, which requires participants to complete four days of water diary logs before the interview, this meant that Regina had known for days that Victor was not going to participate in the interview. Although the data on this particular household might be considered 'incomplete' because not everyone in the household completed the diaries as instructed, Victor's non-participation was significant and relevant to the study because it gave insight into the household dynamics and how the two divided up household labor.[4] The study team thus went ahead and conducted the interview. Over the course of the interview, it became apparent to the two team members that Regina was tracking Victor's whereabouts via a phone app. He was at a friend's house. Seeing Regina follow his movements indicated that she clearly cared about and kept track of Victor in a very tangible way. This particular moment gave our researchers a glimpse into the couple's relationship dynamics.

4. Data from water diaries were not necessarily considered complete data sets from which we could make conclusive arguments regarding household water usage. This was in part because we left the water diaries largely open to the interpretations of household participants (Kim 2019). Participation and non-participation in various aspects of the study thus became part of the data that I examine in this paper.

Regina was the clear head of the household. In the interview, she described herself as the breadwinner of the household as well as "efficient" and "good at conserving" when it came to her water usage habits. Both the manager and main source of household income, Regina gave the interviewers the impression that she felt that her and Victor's household disrupted the mainstream notion of a gendered household. When asked what the number one use of household water usage was, Regina identified showers as the culprit. When it came down to who used the most water in the household, Regina had determined that Victor used the most water. Her sense of each person's roles in the household, particularly who did what and how much, was strong. But when the interviewers asked her explicitly about a gendered division of labor, Regina's responses became less assured. Her movements became fidgety with nervous gesticulating. Regina stated:



> *Yeah…I don't know. Because…I've never really been a cooker. But I've since coming to LA, I was living at home, I didn't need to really, but now that I'm living on my own, I've been learning how to cook and taking that on. And I'm not…I'm not really a cooker or cleaner. And Victor is much better at both. Cooking and cleaning, he's really good at that. But he's lazy [laughs]. Which he says himself, he knows he's lazy. So, I take on those things not because I'm good at them or as a woman, I should, it's because I want to take care of him and also, I don't know, take care of both of us.*

When asked about a gendered division of labor, Regina's first response was to discuss cooking—a household activity often assumed to be the domain of women. In her understanding of a gendered division of labor, particular activities indicated whether a household division of labor might be gendered. Regina evidently took a "gendered division of labor" to mean that the chores had gendered qualities, rather than that the family's division of labor skewed towards one particular gender. Because Regina does not see herself as a "cooker" or "cleaner", she does not see herself as partaking in a gendered division of labor. If anything, Regina seemed to want the team members to think that the couple actually disrupted 'classic' gendered assumptions about household labor because in fact, Victor is "much better" than her at cooking and cleaning. The only problem was that Victor is "lazy."

Regina impressed upon the researchers that if Victor was not lazy, the household would further upend the notion of a gendered division of labor, which she already felt they did because she was the breadwinner. But because he is "lazy," Regina ends up being the one who cooks and cleans. This, in turn, gave the interviewers the impression that there *was* a gendered division of labor in their household. Regina sought to clarify this perception immediately. She pivoted the conversation to say that she does the cooking and cleaning because it was a way for her to demonstrate care. She takes on these particular chores not because she is "good at them" or because she "is a woman," but because she wants to "take care of him" and "take care of both of us." It seemed important to Regina that the interviewers understand this last layer of her rationale regarding the household's division of labor. Through the actions of cooking and cleaning, by not being "lazy" when Victor was, Regina could manifest her love and care for him and their relationship.

In response to Regina's answer, the lead interviewer immediately followed up with the following exchange:

> **Michael:** *Would you say it's more of an individual decision?*
> **Regina:** *Yeah, cause I don't think it's gendered at all. There's some, maybe the part of me that's nurturing is a gender related thing but I…yeah…it's not –*
> **Michael:** *It's not a question of whether right or wrong.*
> **Regina:** *No, I know. [laughs]*

While the interviewer's follow up question is leading, Regina's response conveys a sense of relief with this offered "individual decision" explanation

for the appearance of a gendered division of labor. Again, Regina asserts that the decisions about household labor arrangements were not "gendered at all" and she quickly takes up the individual decision explanation offered by the interviewer. In Regina and Victor's household, individual decisions about the division of labor were driven by laziness and desire to show care. One could ask why Victor chose not to also perform care for Regina in the same way, and why was it that Regina associated cooking and maintaining the household with care and intimacy. Had Victor participated in the study as initially expected, perhaps these themes could have been explored. But according to Regina, there was nothing gendered about the arrangement, for this was a matter of personal quirks and a method of demonstrating one's feelings, and, to her, that is how we should understand why their household was not gendered in any way.

Across the city in a condominium in Beverly Hills, members of the Williams household claimed to maintain a "pretty egalitarian" household. Their interview began with mother Evelyn, eldest daughter Francine, and middle daughter, Kim. The father, Michael, later joined mid-interview. The youngest child and the only son never came in contact with the research team, although his actions were accounted for in a water diary. During the first part of the interview, when it was just the mother and two daughters, we asked the gender question. The girls answered first, discussing how a lot of their friends' mothers did not work and had female maids. The oldest girl was first to consider and discuss their family and household: "But I think our house is pretty even. My dad does a lot of the stuff, too, but she does more though," indicating her mother. Kim interrupted her sister, piping in, "But I don't do anything." Ignoring her sister's interjection, Francine deadpanned, "He'll come home and tell you differently—that he does it all." Francine called her father's behavior spot-on: when Michael arrived twelve minutes later and when we asked him about how chores in the household might be divided along gendered lines, he stated: "Not in this house. They do nothing."

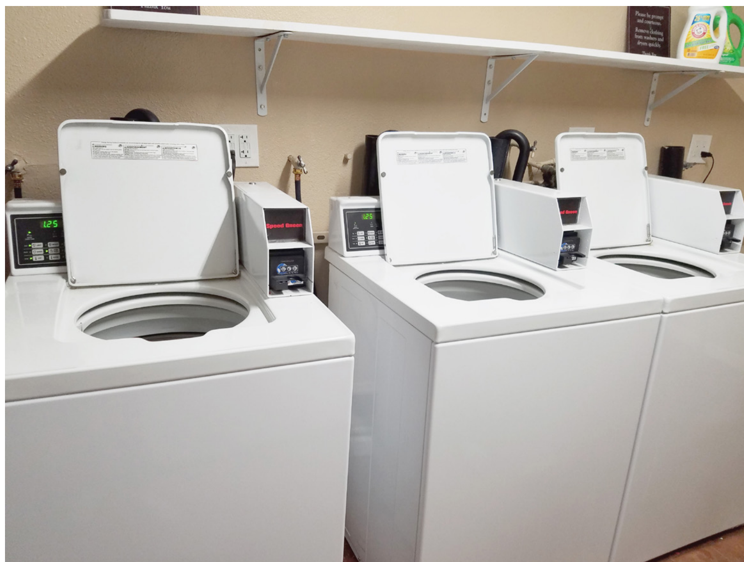
But back to the actual division of labor before Michael arrived home. Addressing her daughters' assessments of the household, Evelyn told interviewers that the household's division of labor was more egalitarian than how her daughters had presented things.

> **Evelyn:** *Yeah, I think we have a pretty egalitarian household. I think, or we try, I think that's fair.*
> **Megan:** *So, what does your husband do or is in charge of?*
> **Francine:** *He sits on the couch and watches TV.*
> **Kim:** *Hmm…he likes to...*
> **Evelyn:** *He's been doing a lot of laundry lately.*
> **Kim:** *He likes to do the dishes, too.*
> **Francine:** *He doesn't like folding the laundry though, so he'll be like, 'Go get it out of the dryer and fold it.' Also, I think he rinses the dishes.*

Evelyn tried to convey to the interviewers that a gendered division of labor did not really exist within their household, but her daughters quickly challenged that idea by pointing out that their father's practices indicated otherwise. In the daughters' assessment, the father's job was to sit on the couch and watch television—not do household labor. Evelyn, moving to assert that her husband actually did work, mentioned that he does laundry. But she also lets it slip that this is a new development, something that he started doing "lately." While Evelyn stated that the household was "egalitarian," her daughters' statements revealed otherwise. Both daughters challenged their mother's claim that the household was egalitarian because they saw that the actual labor of their father's tasks was unequitable. Loading the laundry is not the same amount of work as folding the laundry, which was the part of doing laundry that Michael usually passed off onto the kids. In this household, laundry was a site that exemplified an uneven and gendered division of labor.

Laundry in the five-person Williams household is an endeavor. It piles up quickly and there's always a lot to do. One of the larger households interviewed in the study, the family does laundry three or four times a week. The kids were all involved with after-school activities—including sports, which meant multiple outfits worn throughout the day. Kim noted that she wears sweatshirts to practice and that she sweats a lot, so that was why there were sweatshirts all over the apartment. Each bathroom had a laundry basket, one for the kids and one for the adults. When we asked if anybody in the household rewore their clothes more than once before putting them in the laundry, only Evelyn responded that she did. Evelyn's practice of rewearing clothes was something that her husband, who is white, teased her for doing, citing her "foreign" upbringing in Latin America as the origin of this habit. Meanwhile, Francine noted that she only rewore jeans, and then only up to three wears.

Michael occasionally rewore the work clothes that needed dry cleaning. Pete, the son, never rewore clothes. A five-member household that mostly did not rewear clothes created a lot of laundry and laundry-related chores.



While having in-home washer and dryer units made things easier, laundry was a weekly task that involved multiple loads. Responsibility for the associated tasks was a source of consternation. Early in the interview, after we had asked who used the most water in the household, the conversation shifted to discussing whether there was a general difference in water usage according to gender, leading in turn to the girls and their mother discussing their own household responsibilities. Evelyn stated that she generally did the laundry with Francine helping. Kim also pointed out that her mother also did the dishes—although the nanny helped with dishes as well. At this early moment in the interview, nobody said anything about the father's household responsibilities. Towards the end of the interview, it came to light that although Evelyn initially stated that she did the laundry, Francine had recently taken on the responsibility. Since she would be leaving for college in the fall, her parents decided she needed to learn to do it for herself. Francine, describing her method of doing laundry, stated that she usually does three loads on one day, typically Saturday. She admitted that she tries to "shove in as much as possible," even though she knows that she should be able to see the back of the washer in order for clothes to be cleaned thoroughly. But with such a busy household she tried to take advantage of potential time savings whenever she could.

As the delegator of chores to his children, Michael had the impression that he did the bulk of the household labor. When Michael arrived home, thirty-two minutes after the interview began, the entire tenor of the interview changed. In the middle of an explanation of drip irrigation, Evelyn invited her husband to add to the conversation, taking a gentle jab at him by adding, "We already told them you use a lot of water." Incredulous upon hearing this comment, he responded by criticizing the state of the home and its tidiness. The living room, visible from the dining room table where everyone was seated, was in the standard disarray of a home in the midst of a busy week with three teenagers engaged in numerous sports and after-school activities. As the interview moved on from this awkward moment and we went down the list of standard interview questions, Michael took charge of the conversation by almost always answering first. When we asked the family to speculate about the state of water in the next fifty years, Michael positioned himself as an expert about technologies like desalination. Michael clearly wanted us to know that he did the majority of the labor, which directly contradicted the household labor arrangement that Evelyn, Francine and Kim had laid out earlier in the interview.

> **Megan:** *So, we'd asked a question earlier about how the chores can be divided in a gendered line, and so–*
> **Michael:** *Not in this house. They do nothing.*
> **Kim:** *I don't do anything.*
> **Michael:** *Your brother does more than you both do, and he also rinses his plates more than you do.*
> **Kim & Francine:** *No, he doesn't.*
> **Michael:** *So, the men in this house do more housework.*
> **Francine:** *I do the laundry.*
> **Kim:** *You just like to boss us around.*
> **Francine:** *I fold it, and you just throw it into the thing.*
> **Michael:** *Yeah, but folding is not doing it.*

According to Michael, the burden of the housework fell upon the men. By indicating that he managed the household, Michael claimed responsibility for the work of others, particularly his daughters, who actually did the chores like washing and folding everyone's clothes. In order to emphasize his point, Michael went to the length of claiming that folding clothes did not constitute a chore to make his point. Given that the daughters had alerted us to their father's habit of claiming their labor, the contradiction between what Michael actually did and what he said he did was laid bare for those that had been there for the duration of the interview. In spite of Evelyn's initial assessment that the household was "egalitarian," we observed

that the opposite was true. Out of a desire to manage the situation and to avoid the upward trajectory of awkward moments between family members since Michael arrived home, we made no further mention of the discrepancy we noticed over the course of the interview.

Conclusion

The awkward moments and shifts in interview tenor almost always occurred when we raised questions about gender. Why was it that asking about gender in this way seemed so disruptive, intrusive, and transgressive for both participant and interviewer? Why did I, as interviewer, care so much about diffusing tensions and making sure everyone in the room got along until the end of the interview? Is the home perceived as such a private space that talking about one's home and the organization of one's home life upsets social norms? Raising the issue of gender within households suggested that perhaps our study was peeking into something that we, as outsiders to the home, were not meant to see. An obvious explanation to the guarded reactions of participants might be that we were tracking aspects of people's private lives—we were, after all, strangers who had walked through their homes, asking couples about their relationships and toilet flushing habits. To varying degrees, our participants invoked a claim to their privacy that found expression as awkward moments between them and the research team. Regina, like numerous other participants, was concerned about the messiness of her home and preferred that we photograph the home and its water features during the second visit rather than the first one. To participants, household appearances appeared to be of critical importance. That a similar theme emerged across interviews reveals that this type of reaction was more than anxiety over superficial appearances. It reveals that the sanctity of the public/private divide is entrenched, and the home firmly established as private.

This research project, which explicitly studies gender and household water usage, troubles the dominant notion that American households have accomplished, or at least made strides toward, gender equality. While our study team was attentive to the gendered division of labor, participants' responses to our line of inquiry and interview questions suggests that there is a perception that Americans live in an era of actualized gender equality. This is not the case. The notion of actualized gender equality has already been disrupted by ongoing social movements. Moreover, feminist examination of the home has shown how women's labor within homes is exploited for the benefit of the wider economy.

This study demonstrates that households divide their water-usage related labor in patterned ways that falls along gender lines. This finding resonates with the work of scholars who have shown the myriad of ways that gender shapes American households in terms of decision-making, budgeting and division of labor more broadly (Bianchi et al. 2012; England and Folbre 1999). Furthermore, looking at the organization of the labor in the home reveals the extent to which gender influences seemingly mundane and non-related practices like household water usage when it comes to household labor arrangements.

Gender is a principle of social organization that creates conditions for unequal organization of households. Gender remains a salient taxonomy of social organization; despite the establishment of legal apparatuses to counter gender inequality, it still persists. As anthropologist Michelle Rosaldo (1974) argued, given that the public social domain is associated with men, it has been valued more highly than its complement, the domestic home, which in turn, makes gender inequality structural to social life. Despite the supposed accomplishments of post-Third Wave feminism in U.S. society, when the structural organizing function of gender remains unchanged, gender equality cannot be a reality. Gender underpins the unequal division of households in Los Angeles, and participants' reactions to our examination of gender suggests that it is an underlying issue that many preferred not to discuss. Gender has an enduring influence on life in Los Angeles, even though people might think of it as a problem of the past or one that emerges in other sectors of their lives.

The evidence of gendered divisions of household labor seemed to compel couples to protect the idea of larger, societal gender equality through assurances of gender equality in their home. Our findings of gendered divisions of labor during interviews indicated that something was not quite right; for participants, things were not matching up with the ways that gender is supposed to be configured in this day and age. Participants' range of reactions about

an unequal division of household labor seem to indicate that society and gender have been narrated in a particular way, which should be parsed out in order to make sense of our participants' range of reactions and responses. Something is amiss in an American society that largely proclaimed that gender equality was an issue of the past. These moments indicate that the world many people thought existed has yet to come.

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