

Traditional view on spousal roles persist.

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WIVES are still the main people taking care of the home, even if they are working.

Husbands, on the other hand, are still less active in helping out at home.

Research on the Singapore Family shows that spousal roles are divided along traditional lines of wives as nurturers and husbands as providers. It was done by Associate Professor Stella Quah from the National University of Singapore's sociology department.

She found that among dual-career families, more than half the women cut back on their work so that it would not threaten their marriages. Only about a third of the men had done so. Two-thirds of the 1,652 married interviewees also said they did not share any home duties with their spouses.

But all this is not surprising, since 91 per cent of those surveyed felt a working woman's primary responsibility was to the home.

Despite this inequality, couples said they were satisfied with their marriages and enjoyed a high level of consensus. But not all enjoyed a high level of cohesion, which is when a spouse views the other as a partner, sharing duties. The study also showed that couples with more years of education tended to be more cohesive.

Assoc Prof Quah said the findings showed that Singapore women were modern in thinking but conservative in practice. "Singapore women want to take charge - go to work and share the load at home. But once a couple is committed to each other in marriage, there can be an unequal division of duties if both spouses agree to it.

"It is not a problem if both parties accept it."

Four women leaders The Sunday Times spoke to said people might have been conditioned to accept this unequal partnership by their own families and society.

Dr Kanwaljit Soin, who chairs the United Nations Development Fund for Women (Unifem) Singapore, said if men and women have been conditioned to behave traditionally within a marriage, they will then perceive themselves to be happy.

"But when men and women are modern in their thinking and yet traditional in practice, it is the women who will end up with more work and be stressed," she said.

In a paper on dual-career couples and the impact on the family, Dr Paulin Tay Straughan, assistant professor of sociology at NUS, said work and family are seen as being separate and different. And there are few policies or schemes to merge the two.

As a result, a worker's role at home was not valued as highly as productivity on the job. She asserts that while women gain power through work, men do not gain power by helping out at home, so they leave this to their wives.

But this trend of couples not sharing chores is set to change as more become educated, Assoc Prof Quah said.

"With a higher level of education, there will be more job-sharing at home and greater cohesion at home."