

# Arguing over chores and childcare? Maybe your relationship isn't gay enough!

New figures show that straight women are taking on the lion's share of work at home. I have a solution, says Lotte Jeffs



Lotte Jeffs | Thursday May 28 2020, 12.01am, The Times

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A note to all the straight Susans and hetero Helens out there: I am done hearing you moan about your husband and how he locks himself in his “office” (what used to be your dressing room) all day, pretending to be taking important video calls when, you know, because — duh — you have the same log-in, that he has watched at least one episode of *Money Heist* on Netflix. My patience is wearing thin for you asking me for a socially distanced park walk (sans kids) so you can tell me in a whisper verging on a hiss that last night he said he would give the baby a bath, but insisted on fixing himself a gin and tonic first.

Why is his work more important than yours? Why does it take him two hours to clean the bathroom when you do the entire upstairs in that time? And why oh why won't he shave? He puts his expensive razors on Ocado every week and is refusing to use them because, what? Somehow his scraggly beard will make him look as though he has truly endured this pandemic, when we all know he has been eating crisps and sunbathing for most of it?

This week the Institute for Fiscal Studies confirmed what we suspected. In a study of 3,500 two-parent opposite-gender families, it concluded that mothers have taken on more childcare and housework than fathers. Mothers combine paid work with other activities such as childcare in 47 per cent of their work hours; with fathers, it's just 30 per cent.

It's not that I don't care about all you married straights out there struggling to get through a day without it ending in one of the 'cides. But I also want to stand at the top of Primrose Hill and shout: “You should all be gay!”

Honestly, being a woman married to a woman is brilliant. Having a two-year-old daughter makes it even better. Since the lockdown started I've realised how much easier our family dynamic is when compared with some heterosexual couples, who still seem so burdened by gender expectations. Even some of the most right-on male-female couples I know — the kind where the man has *We Should All Be Feminists* on his bedside table and the woman is the one who knows how to change a tyre — find that they have fallen into a semi-woke version of 1950s home life since lockdown began.

I'm flabbergasted that even the most confident and assertive of straight women have allowed — dare I say enabled — their male partners to do more self-care and less childcare, more WFH and less loo cleaning. Perhaps he took a two-hour pasta-making masterclass in the guise of it “providing for the family”, but it was probably his wife who was scrubbing congealed flour off the kitchen counters afterwards.

Also making me so thankful for that pivotal teenage moment when I first kissed a boy and quickly realised, “Nah, not for me,” are the holier-than-thou husbands who seem to think they deserve the Nobel peace prize for taking a morning off work to homeschool their child. These are the men you see in the park, occasionally shirtless and carrying a baby in a papoose with a look on their face that seems to suggest that the very fact they are taking equal care of a child that they potentially had an equal hand in producing is something to be congratulated for.

What if I told you that my spouse and I have never had an argument? Ever! The odd disagreement, maybe, but never has either of us shouted or lost our temper. And we've dealt with childbirth, moving house and redundancies, among myriad other stressful scenarios. Maybe it's our temperaments, but maybe it's also because we are women.

After a shaky first few weeks of lockdown, when we were all fighting a mild form of what we thought was Covid-19 while still trying to work and find a food delivery slot, we have been thriving in our newly limited lives.

We split everything equally — housework, cooking, the buying of birthday presents, the sending of cards. It's instinctive with two women in a way that I'm told it just isn't for opposite-sex couples. And this, I believe, is the key to queer domestic bliss. My wife and I both work three days and look after our daughter for three days each week. We spend Sunday together as a family, with neither of us working, and it works!

We changed our career expectations after our daughter was born and took jobs that would make this arrangement more manageable. Becoming a parent as a same-sex couple isn't easy. You have to really, really think and talk about it and you have to invest money, time and so much emotion. I know that there are many straight couples for whom this is also true, but for most having a child is something that can happen relatively easily if you want it to.

Likewise, being a woman in love with a woman isn't the easiest path in life either. We had to fight for the right to get married, so it isn't something we take for granted. Perhaps this is why my wife and I never complain about the tantrums or the sleepless nights or the pressures of three months housebound with a tiny and very capricious person. Perhaps it's why we are feeling closer than ever while others in more “traditional” families are being driven to distraction.

This pandemic is making so many of us reconsider our lives, careers and relationships. While pivoting jobs will become a necessity, I wonder how many women will consider pivoting their husband for a wife too. I, for one, heartily recommend it.



Emily Sargent with her rescue cat, Gus  
KATIE WILSON FOR THE TIMES

## Emily Sargent: 'I don't envy my straight friends'

I am 31 and since the age of 25 I've felt pretty jazzed to be a lesbian. There were obviously the terrible years of hating myself and wishing I could love a man, but once I was in my first relationship with a woman I quickly realised I was in for a life of equality, clean sinks with no beard hair and nice bed sheets that weren't from Asda. (Sorry to my ex-boyfriend.)

I dated that particular sweet man for years, so I've lived with boyfriends and girlfriends — and I do not envy some of my straight friends. In lockdown times the tempers of female friends being watched from the sofa as they Hoover — again — are fraying.

I'm often asked of my relationship with my girlfriend: “Who is the man and who is the woman?” My answer is that, broadly speaking, I cook and clean and she owns a drill. But then — hang on; I hammered together a garden planter last week while she baked cinnamon rolls and hung up the laundry. Wait . . . then fixed the wifi.

For all the relationship niggles we have a 50:50 balance when it comes to dividing chores and life admin. She grooms the cat, I brush his teeth. And that's how you keep the spark alive.

Because there was no blueprint when we moved in together, there's no assumption based on stereotypes of who does what. Chore-wise, dating a woman is great because they just get stuff done. No fuss, just unadulterated, steely efficiency.

Women are fantastic at doing things without wasting energy on avoiding doing them or, worse, talking about doing them (before and after). And we both lend the same amount of mental space to worrying and thinking — or, as it's known in the equality business, “mental load”.

My feeling when I was in a relationship with a man and what I still see with some straight friends (again, some) is that division of labour is often stacked on assumptions about “what you're good at”. Which is a sneaky way of getting someone to do something, if you ask me.

I'd hate it if we didn't do things equally. I'd feel fundamentally as if we didn't respect each other. As a TV writer, she has very much been the breadwinner during lockdown while some of my work has been paused and it's made me think about this far more.



There have been times when I've felt overly sensitive about being the one to cook, again, while she's writing until 8pm. In those moments I get a glimpse of the resentment that could build over years and I hate it and the way it makes me feel

I also sometimes wonder what my role at home would look like if I were with a man. Doing a straw poll of lesbian and straight friends, I found there were some marked differences. I hope that lockdown may give us a boost on the road to equality, but for now I feel lucky to be a lesbian. Because we make our own rules.

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