

Is outsourcing the future of domestic drudgery?



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1. Introduction

When we look at the way the world is changing, it is often tempting to focus on subjects that are new and exciting. In the last ten years the big themes have been technological – portable information communication technologies and web 2.0 – and economic – broadly, the effect of a fifteen-year economic boom on people’s tastes and aspirations and the rapid increase of women in senior jobs. Inevitably though, when we approach change from the perspective of the bright and the flashy we pay less attention to that which is familiar and ignore the small details of people’s lives. The everyday becomes a vast unreported world.

This report, in contrast, is about housework and domestic drudgery: one of the most everyday issues in anyone’s life. Because, of course, while these more exciting changes have been taking place, food has still been prepared, dishes have been washed, and gardens have, hopefully, been kept from returning to the wilderness. The question is how these tasks fit into people’s lives, how they cope, and whether the strategies they employ have changed or are likely to change in the coming years.

The first section of the report gives an overview of who spends what amount of time doing housework and how this has changed over time. Having established the trend in housework, it goes on to consider how it might relate to other social trends including changes in employment and in leisure habits. It shows that on the whole we are busier and that other activities are squeezing housework out.

The second section explores whether “outsourcing” housework, that is paying someone to do it, may provide a solution. This includes an analysis of time series data showing how the popularity of outsourcing has changed over time. It also makes use of the original research commissioned for this report that contains insights into people’s desire to outsource. In sum, this section plots the past trajectory of outsourcing and the factors that will affect it in the future. It ends by predicting which particular household tasks are most likely to be outsourced in the future.

The final section looks at the attitudes that people have towards housework. Again using original research, it shows that housework is not just a task that must be completed but, like so much other work, has a very human emotional dimension. This contains insights into how people feel about cleaning, what it means socially, and the satisfaction they get while they are doing it and when it is done.

Unsurprisingly, as the world continues to get busier, the report concludes that outsourcing housework is only going to grow in the future. Hopefully, though, by exploring the human interests that shape these decisions it helps us understand why certain tasks will be outsourced more than others and, if it happens, what the effects on individuals might be.

2. Overview: Housework in the UK

2.1. Who is doing the housework?

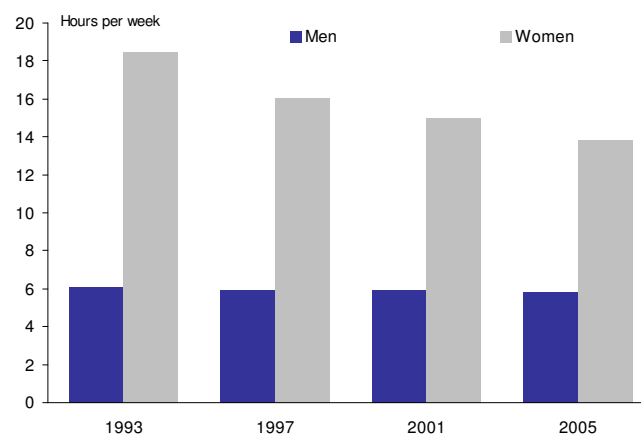
If we want to understand the appetite for outsourcing domestic tasks we need to understand who does housework at the moment and how this might change in the future.

2.1.1. Men are catching up with women [but slowly]

Even after so many years of movement towards gender equality, women still spend far longer doing housework than men.

Chart: Change in the amount of time devoted to housework

Mean number of hours per week spent doing housework, by gender



Source: British Household Panel Study/ nVision

Base: 10,000 adults aged 16+, Britain

In the twelve years between 1993 and 2005, the amount of time that women devoted to housework declined from 18.5 hours per week to just under 14. During the same period, men were stable at 6 hours per week: less than half the time spent by women even at the lowest point. More detailed analysis of time-use diaries¹ shows that women's decline in housework has been spread across all types of tasks whereas men spent slightly less on cleaning but have increased the amount of time they spend cooking.

¹ ONS time use

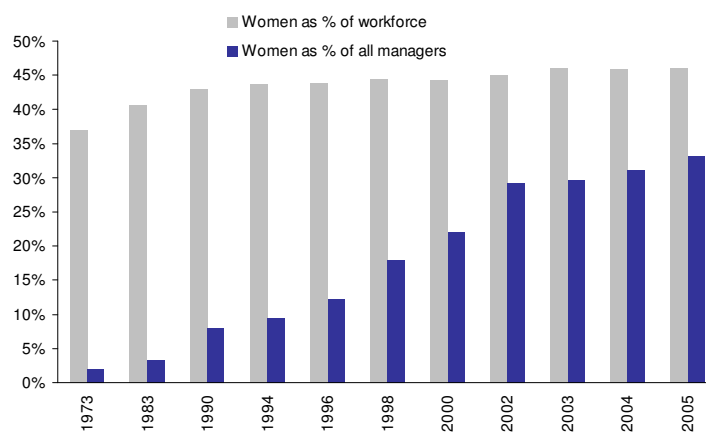
2.2. The effect of social change

2.2.1. Women are not just more economically active, they are more economically powerful

Inevitably, the amount of time people spend on household tasks depends on the amount of time they spend at work.

Chart: increasing equality in the workplace

UK women as a proportion of workforce and as a proportion of all managers



Source: National Management Salary Survey nVision

Base: All adults aged 16-59/64, UK

In the period between 1993 and 2005, the proportion of the workforce that was made up of women stayed relatively stable at just under 45%. Crucially though, the seniority of these women increased: less than 10% of all managers were women in 1993, by 2005 this had risen to 2005. This means that women were earning more, had more responsibility, may have had to work longer hours, and would have had far higher expectations of being treated as equals in comparison with men.

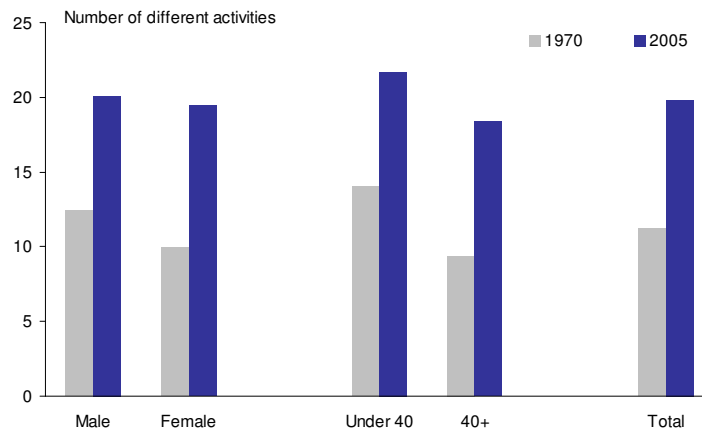
During this period wages for managers rose considerably, those of cleaners and other domestic type jobs have only really been changed by the minimum wage. This means that the gap between what a lot of women earn and the market value of domestic work has grown considerably. It may be that, psychologically, domestic type work is less valued than it was in the past.

Thinking about the future, we can see that this trend is likely to continue. In the early/mid nineties the number of female graduates overtook the number of male graduates and has continued to increase. We can expect women to continue to become more economically powerful, particularly in younger cohorts. It seems unlikely to us that they will accept the status quo division of domestic labour. This stands to be the biggest pressure towards a new solution being found.

2.2.2. We do more in our free time

Chart: Increase in leisure portfolios

Number of different leisure activities people engage in during a twelve month period



Source: nVision Research/ 'The Symmetrical Family', 1970

Base: All respondents in London/South East amongst 1000 - 2000 adults 16+

People's range of leisure activities has almost doubled from 11 in 1970 to 20 in 2005. Not only do people have less time because they are busier, they also have higher expectations about what is a normal number of interests to have. This is not just a story of people have less time because of leisure; it is also a story of people feeling that they should be managing to do more with their free time. Indeed, a majority, 55%, agree that, *when they are doing housework they can feel guilty that they are not doing something else*. We suggest, then, that people do not just feel guilty for avoiding housework; in today's society they actually feel guilty for not enjoying themselves enough.

In sum, then, changes in society have given housework a hammering. Women work more and may value housework less; men have managed to not decline but were at a low level to begin with; and our expectations of the activities we can do in our leisure time have increased without us having any extra time to spend on them. We must assume, then, that the UK is able to accept lower standards of cleanliness than it did in the past.

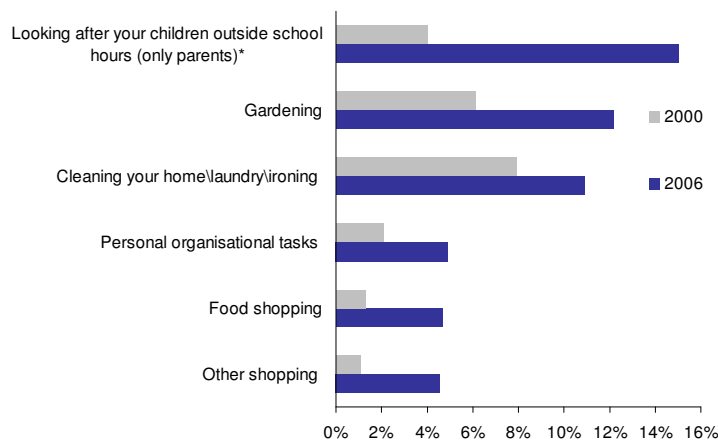
3. Time to get someone in: outsourcing domestic tasks

It is possible, of course, to avoid doing housework without having to tolerate lower standards. You just need to pay someone else to do it.

3.1. An increase in outsourcing

Chart: Increase in “outsourcing” between 2000 and 2006

“Do you pay someone to help you with any of the following tasks...”



Source: nVision Research
 Base: 1,230 adults aged 16+, 2006

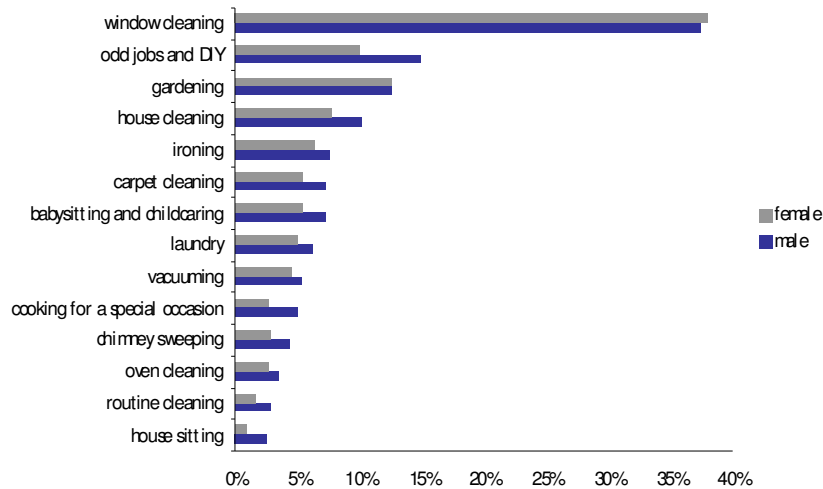
As the chart above shows, between 2000 and 2006 the number of people paying others to do domestic tasks increased considerably. Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the increased economic activity of women, the biggest rise was in paid for child-care: a necessary condition for many women in families with young children to go to work. This offers even more support for the position that the recent history of domestic tasks, outsourced or not, has been a female story.

We should also note, however, that despite the rises the absolute levels of outsourcing domesticity remain low.

3.2. The appetite for outsourcing

3.2.1. Which tasks are outsourced by the most people?

Chart: The differences between men and women

“In the last month, have you paid someone to do the following tasks?”

Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007

Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

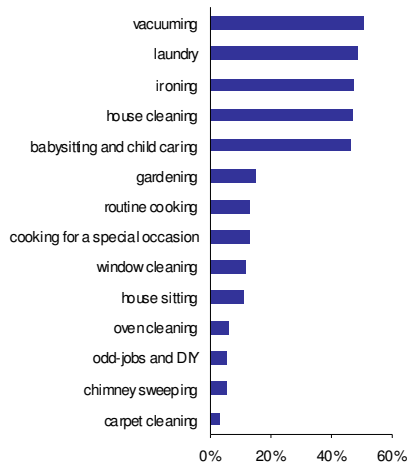
This slightly more comprehensive list of tasks shows a similar level of outsourcing with one very interesting difference: at 38%, window cleaning is far and away the most popular task to outsource in the UK. There are good reasons why this should be the case: window cleaning is generally an external activity, you don't have to trust window cleaners in your house; it is done relatively infrequently; involves ladders; and as we shall see later in the report, it costs relatively little. These characteristics are helpful for us to identify which tasks may be good candidates for outsourcing in the future. We might also want to consider, however, whether a less direct social effect is at work: window cleaning may just be popular because it is popular. That is to say that the most important stimulus could actually be people's social networks: when they see their family, friends, and neighbours paying for someone else to clean the windows, they think that they should too. This is particularly interesting as it suggests that in the future we could see a strong positive feedback effect if levels of outsourcing continue to rise: the time between 20% outsourcing a particular task and 40% outsourcing it may be much less than we might otherwise expect.

The other clear point is that men actually appear to outsource more than women, even when we ask about baby sitting and childcare. In interpreting this we should be careful to remember that many of these decisions will be taken as household, particularly those involving childcare. It may also be that men who live alone are more likely to outsource. In any case, the differences between men and women are relatively small.

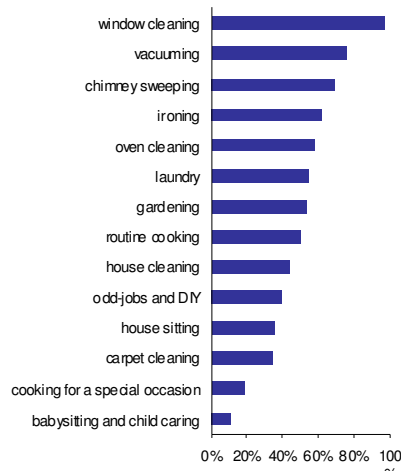
3.2.2. Regularity of different tasks

Chart: Regular short tasks and irregular longer tasks

**“For those that you do pay for help with... how often do you do so?”
[once a week or more]**



**“For those that you do pay for help with... how long does it take?”
[two hours or less]**



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007
Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

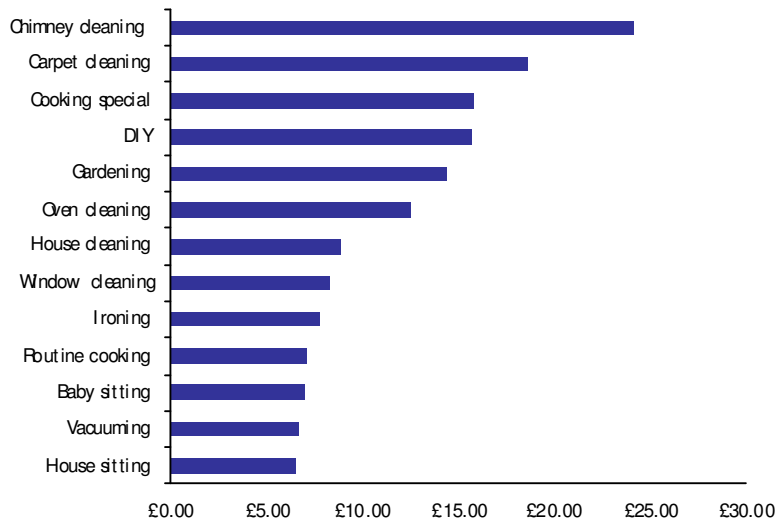
As the charts above show, less than 15% of people outsource *window cleaning*, *chimney sweeping*, *oven cleaning*, or *gardening*, on a regular basis (in this case, once a week or more). When they are outsourced, more than 50% of people say that each task takes less than two hours. They therefore seem to be good candidates for outsourcing: indeed, as we have said, *window cleaning* is far away the most popular outsourced task. The picture is less clear with the other tasks: less than 5% outsource *chimney sweeping*, probably because so few people have working chimneys; every one has ovens, though, and yet *oven cleaning* is still only outsourced by 3%. Gardening is relatively popular at 13%, and, if there is appetite for it to grow, these characteristics suggest that it would be a good candidate.

3.2.3. How much it costs

In the end, for something to be outsourced, the benefits, what ever they are, will have to outweigh the costs.

Chart: How much people pay per task

**“For those that you do pay for help with... how much do you pay per hour?”
[mean]**



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007

Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

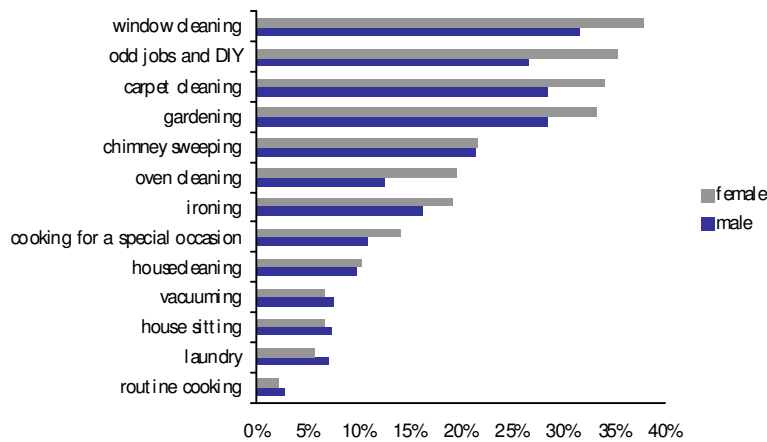
As the chart above shows, the cost per hour of different tasks varies considerably from just under £6 an hour to more than four times that figure. Relatively rare tasks involving specialist knowledge and equipment top the list; those that are easier to provide are the cheapest.

Oven cleaning is apparently a mid-cost task. Given its relative rarity and its short duration, we should not expect its cost to be too much of a barrier. So far, oven cleaning looks to be the ‘hottest’ bet for outsourcing in the future.

3.2.4. Potential for outsourcing

Chart: Potential for outsourcing

“Which of these tasks would you consider paying someone to do?”



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007
Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

When we ask what people would be prepared to outsource, the gender pattern is reversed. Compared to men, women are particularly likely to want to outsource *odd jobs and DIY*, *carpet-cleaning*, *gardening*, and *oven cleaning*. It is not clear what connects these four activities, we assume that it is a combination of tasks that women are more likely to do and those tasks that they are particularly keen to avoid.

These points assume that outsourcing is just a way to avoid housework, either because people don't have time or because they dislike a particular task. It turns out, though, that 63% of people agree with the statement, “*I call in the professionals because I expect the quality to be higher than if I do it myself*”. That is, they do it because they expect it to be better. As with the most expensive tasks identified earlier, this is likely to apply most to those tasks that involve specialist knowledge and therefore to those that have not been semi-mechanised as laundry has.

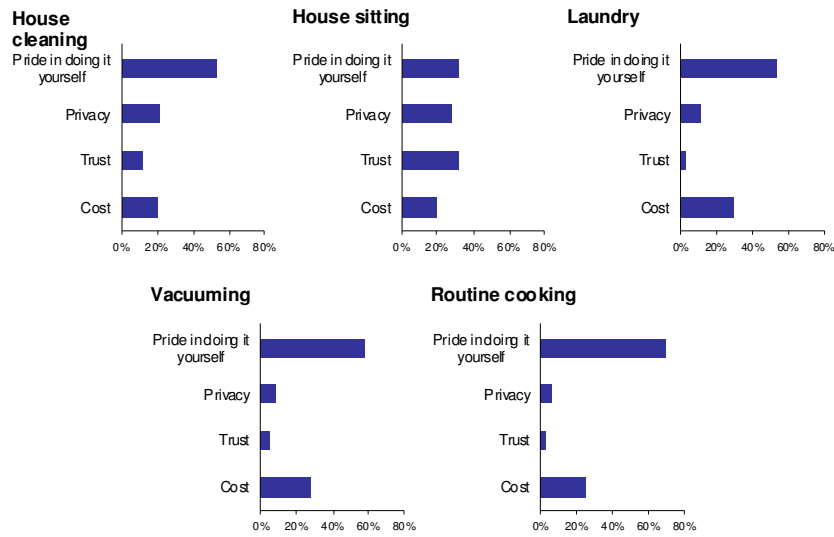
In terms of absolute values, more people would like to outsource than actually do so at the moment. Interestingly though, this gap between actual outsourcing and potential outsourcing varies considerably according to task: *window cleaning* appears to be at saturation whereas the large gap between actual and potential for *carpet cleaning* and *oven cleaning* suggests that change may come quickly if these tasks start to be outsourced. The final thing to say, and possibly the one that has most significance for the future, is that there are certain activities that very few people would like to outsource. These include *house cleaning*, *vacuuming*, *house sitting*, *laundry*, and *routine cooking*. The question, of course, is why?

3.2.5. The importance of “pride”

Looking at the lists below of the five tasks that people would least consider paying someone to do, we notice that each one requires the provider of the service to go into people's houses on a regular basis. We could conclude that few people want to outsource them because they don't trust strangers or they want to keep the inside of their house private.

Chart: Reasons for not outsourcing certain tasks

“For those tasks that you would not employ someone, what is the reason”



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007
Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

As the charts above show though, trust and privacy are only important in the case of *house sitting* and, to a lesser extent, *house cleaning*. In the three other tasks they make a negligible contribution compared to the cost of outsourcing and, most strongly, the pride that people take in doing the work themselves.

4. The cult of the home

Anyone who watches television or reads newspapers will be aware that what we might call “homeliness” has boomed in the last ten years. From the fabric of the home itself to the food that is cooked in it, property, decorating, and home cooking have taken over the airwaves and the pages of newspaper colour supplements. The question is, how have changing aspirations played out during a period in which the time spent on keeping the house looking good has decreased.

4.1. The connection between cleaning and socialising

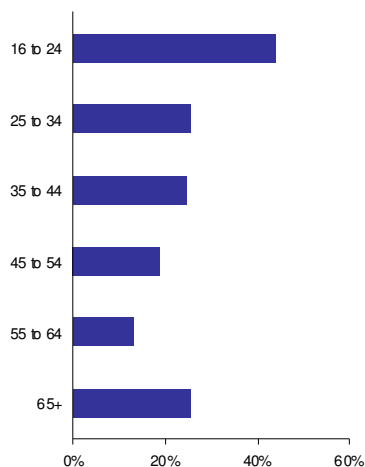
Whatever people do on a regular basis, it is when people visit that the house is really on show. We would therefore expect there to be a connection between socialising at home, people’s feelings about cleaning, and the amount they outsource these tasks.

4.1.1. More socialising means more outsourcing

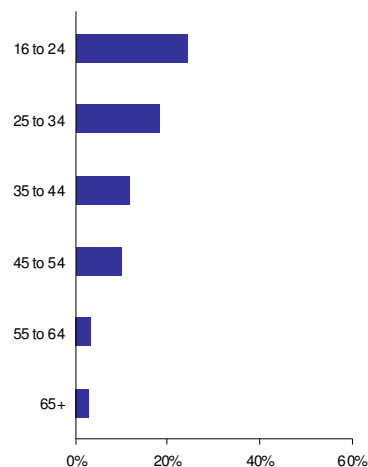
As we saw in the first section of the report, the size of people’s leisure portfolios – that is, the number of leisure activities they do on a regular basis – has grown considerably. Our nVision trend data shows that this has not just happened in, but has also happened outside, the home where the number of leisure activities increased from 6 regular activities across a twelve month period up to an average of 9.

Chart: Socialising at home

“On average, how often have you socialised at home in the past 12 months?” [once a week or more]



“Is this more or less than in the previous year?” [more]



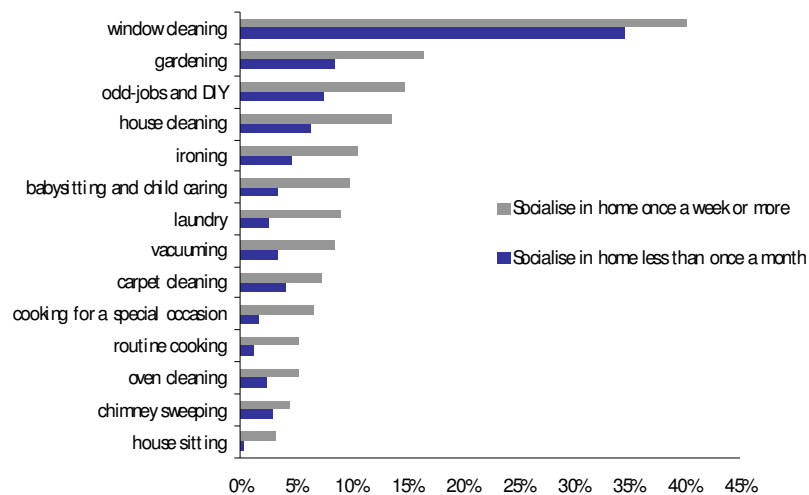
Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007
Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

As the charts above shows, the younger you are the more likely you are to socialise at home. This pattern continues approximately until people reach retirement age after which it rises again. Indeed, nearly a majority (44%) of 16-24 year olds socialise at home more than once a week: this is a lot of

opportunity for friends to see their houses and may necessitate regular cleaning. Of course, as we suggested in the first section, this level of socialising may just make people very busy and may reduce their time for household tasks.

Chart: Socialising and outsourcing

“In the last month, have you paid someone to do the following tasks?”



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007

Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

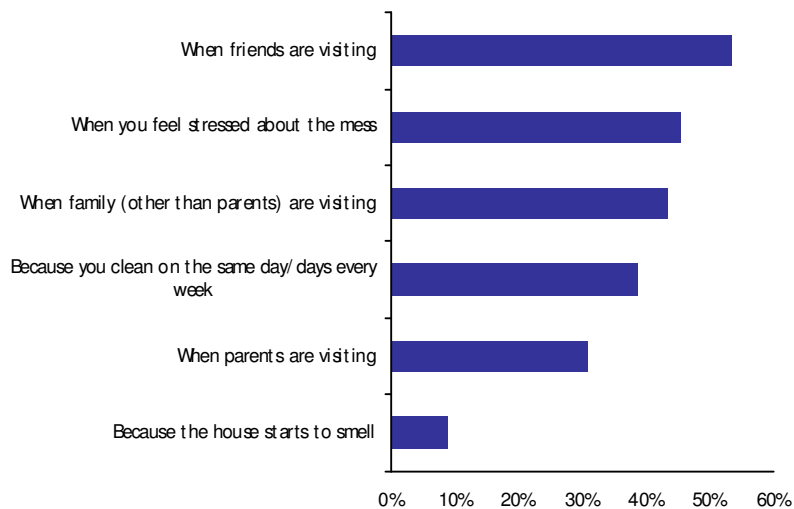
As the chart above shows, people that socialise more are more likely to outsource domestic drudgery. This is true for all tasks, even those, like ironing, that have very little effect on the appearance of a house. We should, at least, conclude that those that socialise a lot are either too busy to do the work themselves or tend to be richer and so can more easily afford to pay for it. The suspicion remains, though, that a regular stream of visitors brings its own pressures to those who care about the appearance of their home.

4.1.2. Socialising and the need to clean

As we said at the beginning of this section, the home is most on display when people visit. It makes sense, then, that the prospect of visitors would be an important stimulus to clean.

Chart: Reasons to clean

“Which of the following reasons influence when you decide to clean?”



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007
Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

Friends visiting is, indeed, the most popular reason for people to decide to clean with 54% agreement. This is ahead of *family (other than parents)* at 43% and *parents* at 41%. Thankfully, only 9% of people follow their noses and start to clean “*when the house starts to smell*”.

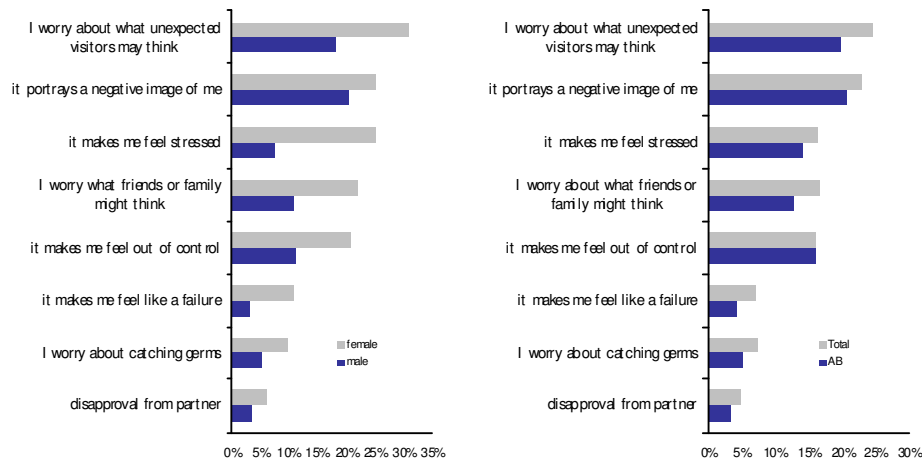
The second most popular reason is because people “*feel stressed about the mess*” which 49% of women and 42% agree with. This reason is interesting as it moves the discussion away from the practical necessity of cleaning the house for visitors into the territory of housework as a strategy to avoid stress. These sorts of worries are very common; our survey showed that 43% of people “*worry about their house being clean*”, “*all the time*” or “*quite a lot*”.

4.2. Cultural influences on domestic tasks

4.2.1. “Worry” and the need to clean

Chart: Variation in “worry” by gender and social grade

“What are your reasons for worrying about your house being clean and tidy?” [those that worry]



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007
Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

Overall, the charts above show that women are considerably more likely to worry than men and that “AB’s” are less likely to worry about their house being clean and tidy. In both cases this worry is most strongly directed towards the possibility of *revealing the house to unexpected visitors* and, at fourth, *worrying about what friends or family might think*. It seems that worry is, indeed, connected to the previous points about socialising.

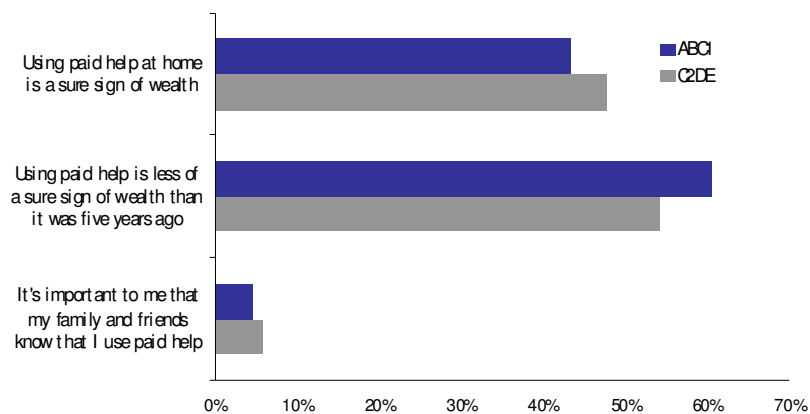
Worry also appears to be acted out in a more generalised way with 23% thinking it is connected to a *negative image of me*, 15% agreeing that “*it makes [them] feel stressed*” and a similar proportion agreeing that it makes them “*feel out of control*”. This suggests that housework is not just a practical concern but that it is, in fact, tied to people’s self esteem. This is particularly the case for women who outscore men considerably on each of these more general measures.

4.2.2. Social class affects attitudes to outsourcing, but not a lot

As we saw earlier, AB’s worry the least about the cleanliness of their homes. They also take a different approach to what it means for someone to outsource domestic tasks.

Chart: Variation in attitudes to outsourcing according to social class

Agreement with the following statements



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007

Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

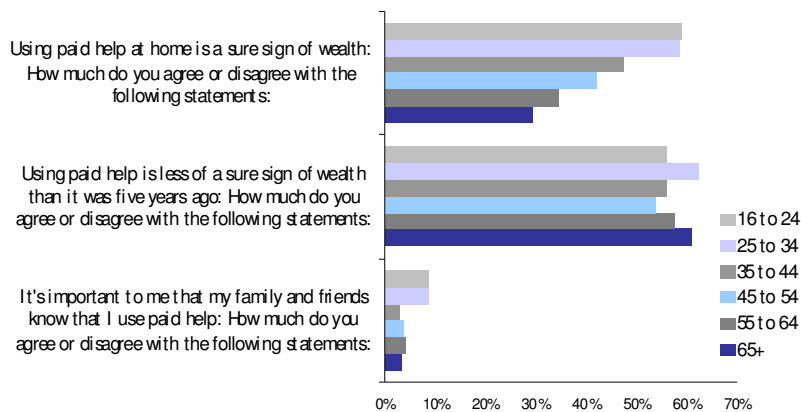
First of all, perhaps because they are the most familiar with it, ABC1's are less likely to think that "Using paid help at home is a sure sign of wealth", although the level of agreement is still high at 43%. They are also most sensitive to changes that they perceive having occurred over the last five years: 61% agree that "using paid help is less of a sure sign of wealth than it was five years ago". Among those that do outsource any tasks, only a small number of the population (5%) think, "it is important to me that my family and friends know that [they] use paid help".

There is even less difference between ABC1's and C2DE's when we compare their reasons for not outsourcing house cleaning. Both groups put little emphasis on *trust* and *privacy* and care most about the *cost* and *pride in doing it themselves*.

4.2.3. Age has the biggest effect

The one demographic factor that does affect these attitudes is age.

Agreement with the following statements



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Future Foundation, 2007

Base: UK, 1005 adults aged 16+

Just under 60% of 16-24 year olds and 25-34 year olds agree that outsourcing domestic tasks is a sure sign of wealth. This equates to under 30% of those who are 65+. First, as people get older they tend to get richer and realise how rich other people are. Paying someone to do housework may just seem less impressive. In simpler terms, though, it may just be that more of them and their friends have outsourced this sort of work themselves.

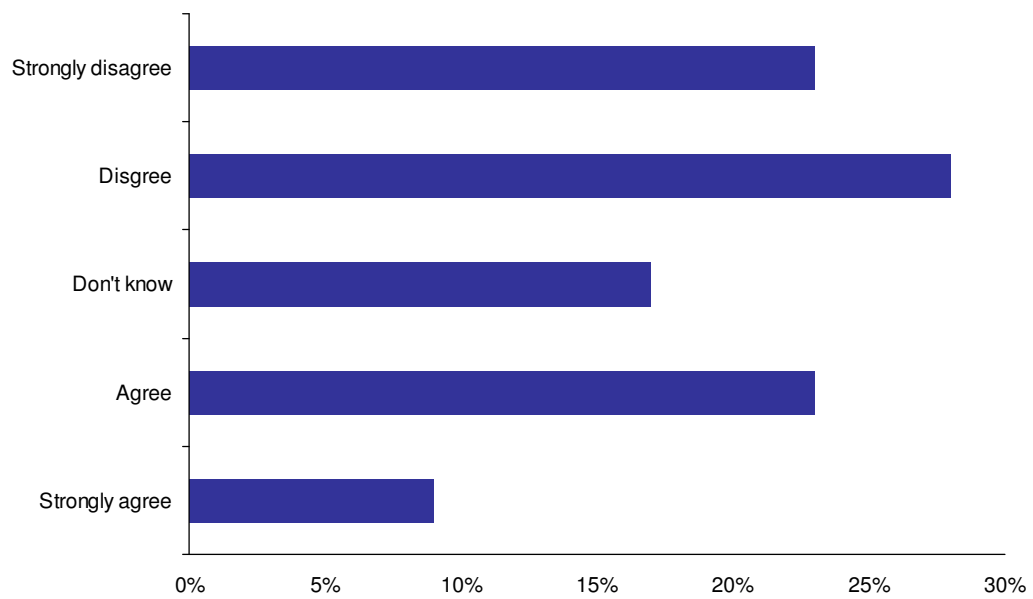
In terms of change over the last five years, a majority of all ages agrees that it is less important than it was.

5. Appendix

Is housework doing the dirty on your relationship?

Charts: Further statistics from Fly Research

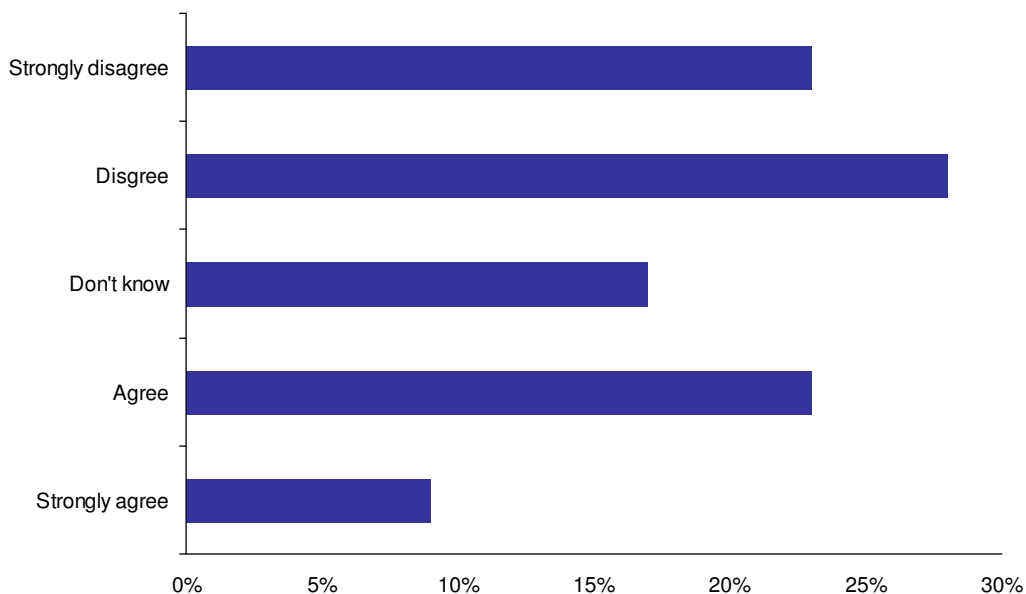
"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?: I would consider / have considered employing hired help with domestic chores to help my relationship"



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Fly Research, 2008

Base: UK, 1045 adults aged 18+

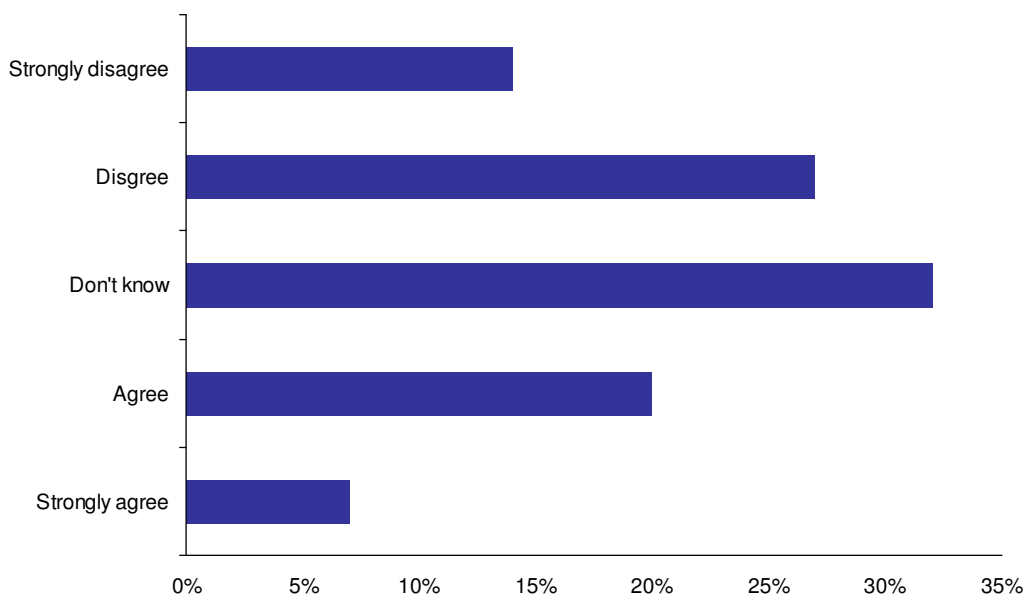
"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?: I would consider / have considered employing hired help with domestic chores to help my relationship"



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Fly Research, 2008

Base: UK, 1045 adults aged 18+

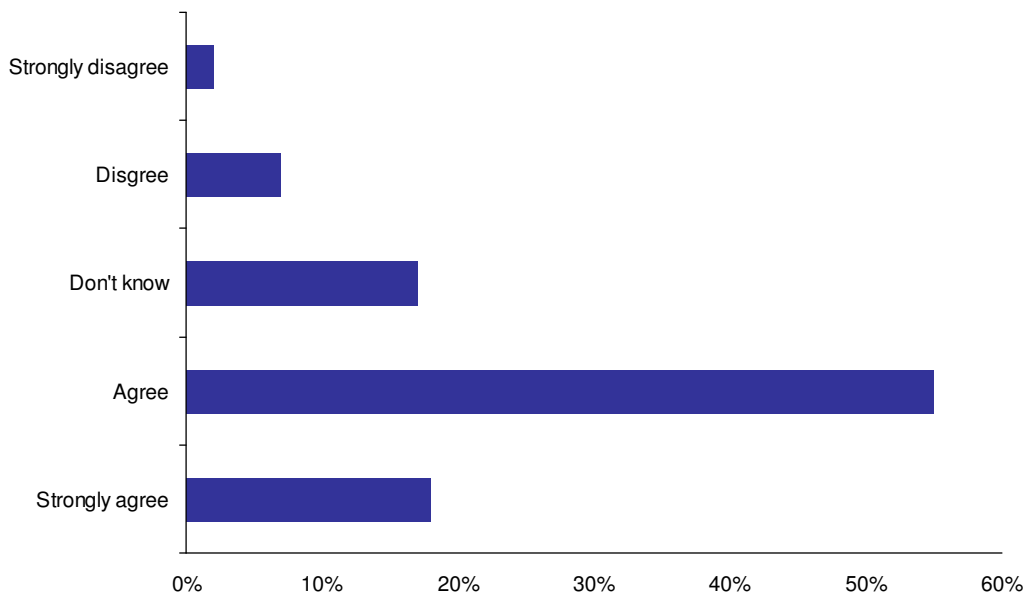
"To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?: If my partner continually refused to do their fair share of chores I would consider ending the relationship"



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Fly Research, 2008

Base: UK, 1045 adults aged 18+

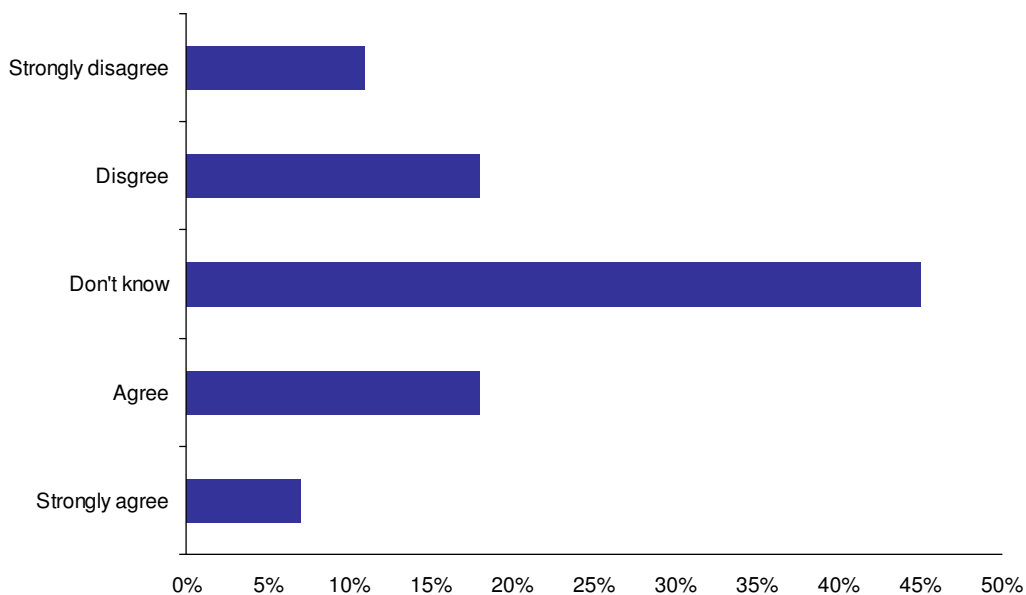
“To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?: In some households, housework (or the lack of it) is a significant contributor to feelings of anger / resentment / stress”



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Fly Research, 2008

Base: UK, 1045 adults aged 18+

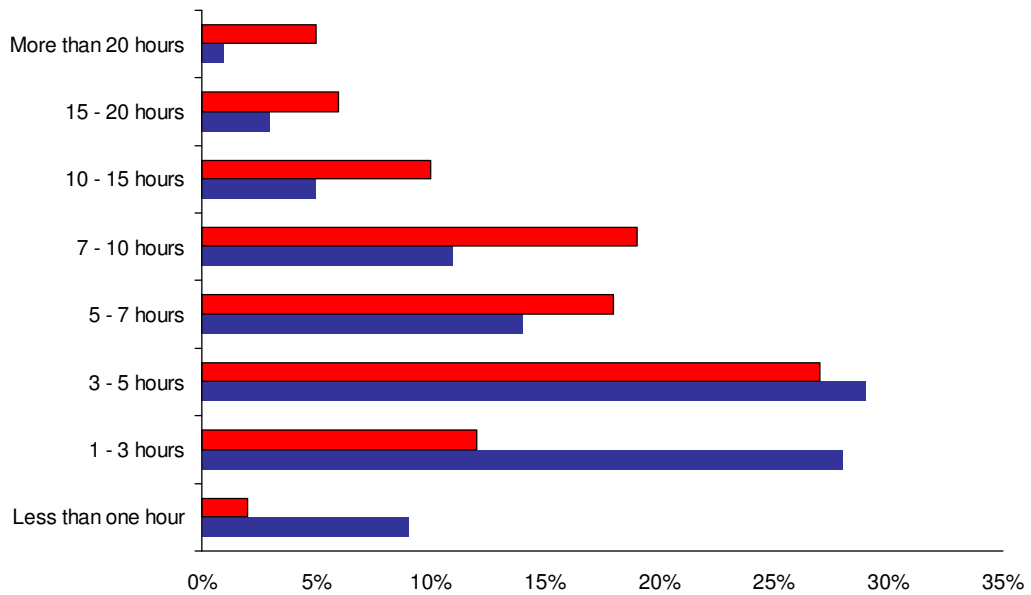
“To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?: Having hired help in the home tends to lead to a happier a more peaceful partnership”



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Fly Research, 2008

Base: UK, 1045 adults aged 18+

"Approximately how many hours per week do you spend in total on domestic chores such as tidying up, cleaning, dusting, ironing, vacuuming, washing dishes, etc?"



Source: Sheilas' Wheels/Fly Research, 2008

Base: UK, 1045 adults aged 18+