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Women’s Domestic Work

As discussed in Chapter 1, the term ‘domestic work’ refers to the unpaid work carried out by household members for themselves and each other. This can include routine housework (for example, cooking, cleaning, washing and shopping); non-routine work (for example, gardening, do-it-yourself and car maintenance); and child care which is often considered to be the most onerous of women’s contemporary domestic duties. The activities usually associated with domestic work are to be found in all societies with women being assigned to similar types of tasks in all contexts. However, although in pre-capitalist societies a strict gender division of tasks may have existed, productive and reproductive tasks were not separated in time and space. Consequently, women’s domestic activities counted as work alongside subsistence agriculture and production for the market. It is only in industrial societies, such as Britain and France, where the employment-place became separated from the household temporally and spatially, that women’s household activities became detached from the notion of work. Indeed, the concept of ‘domestic work/labour’ was originally developed within women’s studies research and the feminist movement in the 1960s and 1970s in North America and Europe as part of a strategy to emphasize both the practical importance of women’s work in the home to the functioning of society and the economy and, more importantly, the theoretical importance of women’s responsibility for this labour in explaining their oppression (see Chapter 5). Indeed, one of the major contributions to the study of ‘work’ which feminist academics and theorists and women’s studies researchers have made during the past 30 years is to challenge the dominant ideology that views work as synonymous with employment. A comparison of women’s
participation in domestic labour must, therefore, be central to any comparison of women's working lives in Britain and France as we highlighted in Chapter 1.

However, although much research has been carried out on women's domestic labour in the context of single-nation studies which conclude that the unequal gender division of domestic labour has far-reaching consequences for all aspects of women's lives (for example, Baruch and Barnett, 1987; Berk, 1985; Brannen et al., 1994; Gershuny et al., 1994; Gregson and Lowe, 1994; Morris, 1995; Pahl, 1984; Sofer, 1985), many of the existing cross-national comparisons of women's economic position have focused upon differences in employment patterns and highlighted the effect that contrasting social and labour market policies exert on women's opportunities for paid work. Consequently, if not necessarily intentionally, the principal barometer of progress in gender relations within such studies has been rates of women's full-time employment and the implicit conclusion has generally been that progressive social and labour market policies can and do challenge women's subjugated position. In this vein, countries are frequently placed on a spectrum of 'more' to 'less' progressive. If we retain this primary focus on paid work, such a conclusion is perhaps not unfounded, as we have seen in Chapter 2. However, do such conclusions still hold true when the gender division of domestic labour within and between households is taken into account? We must ask, therefore, if women are involved in paid work to a greater extent in France than in Britain, is there also a greater renegotiation of the domestic workload taking place in France? If not, then we must address the question of how the domestic work traditionally carried out by 'inactive' women is getting done. These are the questions raised and answered by this chapter.

To commence, therefore, this chapter reviews the contrasting methodologies that have been adopted to evaluate the extent and nature of domestic work so as to contextualize the findings on domestic labour in Britain and France presented in subsequent sections. Following this, we examine the magnitude and character of domestic labour in each country. On the one hand, we analyse the gender division of domestic labour in couple-based households, evaluating the amount of domestic work undertaken by men and women in each country, the types of tasks each undertakes, the question of responsibility for domestic labour and to conclude, the central and particular issue of child care. On the other hand, we