

The Division of Labor  
In the Home

Leslie Mar

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Professor Chris Dean  
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## **The Division of Labor in the Home**

### **Introduction**

Gendered ideologies influence the way we think, the goals we make, and the roles we take on in and out of the home. West & Zimmerman, define “Doing gender” as the “activity of managing situated conduct in light of normative conceptions of attitudes and activities appropriate for one’s sex category” (1987, p.2). For example, society has glorified motherhood and has branded women with the inescapable label of mother. Men, on the other hand, are more associated with masculinity, business, and managerial positions (Thorne, 1992). Based on these ideas, it is easy to see how the image of the traditional nuclear family was formed. While it is true that this generation has been more aware of socially constructed gender roles, it has not changed some of the fundamental inequalities that occur on a day to day basis. This leads me to ask whether working women will be able to eliminate the conflicts and issues regarding the division of labor in the home when faced with a resistant society.

### **Background: Gender and the Traditional Family**

Society has constructed gender through out history. Before the idea of “industrial time” families functioned around the home and the work that a mother and father did were considered to be equal (Fujino, 2006). Gender ideologies of femininity and masculinity help shape families by providing the building blocks people are encouraged to use. An example would be the types of masculinity mentioned in Kimmel’s “Masculinity as Homophobia”. Hegemonic masculinity consists of, no sissy stuff, proving yourself with materials, being a reliable sturdy oak, as well as being competitive an outgoing. He also described the “market place man” as someone who works in a male dominant world, is an absent father, is devoted to being the bread winner, and requires materials, or toys, to prove his masculinity (Brod & Kaufman, 1994). These ideas of

masculinity encourage men to be more active in the market place than in the home and thus affect the way his family will be shaped.

The traditional nuclear family shows women at home with the children while the men go out and work as the breadwinners. In the past few decades however, more and more women have entered the paid work force as either laborers or as career women. Regardless of this change, “the workplace, the culture, and most of all, the men, have not adjusted themselves to this new reality” (Hochschild, 1989, p.235). In other words, behavioral and organizational changes lag behind ideological changes. An example of this “stalled revolution” is the current labor division of the home (Hochschild, 1989, p. 235).

### **The Second Shift**

Hochschild (1989) defines the additional unpaid work, such as cleaning and cooking, that people do in the home as the “second shift”. According to her, women worked an “extra month of twenty-four hour days a year” taking care of the second shift (p.3). Why is it that women are stuck doing all this work? In my family, my father was the traditional bread winner husband who took care of all the finances and provided for everything. He felt that he did not have to clean since he worked and paid all the bills, while my mother stayed at home. If this is a valid reason for immunity from housework, then why doesn't it work the other way around?

If women are equal breadwinners in the home, then how do men continue to avoid sharing equal responsibility for the second shift? Hochschild (1989) provides the story of a family, the Tanagawas, which serves of an example of how gender ideologies can effect the division of labor. Nina Tanagawa was a successful business woman who has quickly climbed the professional ladder. She worked long hours and served as the main bread winner for the family, but still did most of the housework. She explained that when she married her husband they had agreed to share the housework, but as her career blossomed she felt a shift in their ideals. Nina

felt that the difference in their paychecks made her even more responsible for the housework. She explained that she did it to reward her husband for accepting that she made more money than him. The idea that the status of bread winner is a part of masculinity made Nina feel somewhat guilty for “emasculating” her husband (pp. 75-94).

Another example provided by Hochschild (1989) is the story of the Holts. Nancy Holt considered herself to be a feminist and believed in an egalitarian home. She and her husband, Evan, agreed to divide the housework through a set schedule. For example, they decided that he would cook dinner on certain nights of the week. This arrangement worked out well at first, but then Evan began a certain “cycle of passive refusal” (p.38). He would “cheat” by just ordering take out or conveniently “forget” that it was his turn to cook, and then Nancy would end up cooking. He would always find some excuse to get out of his share of the work and Nancy eventually gave up and ended up doing most of the work herself.

Although Nancy was unhappy with the situation, she decided that it was not worth getting a divorce over. Instead, she dealt with it by convincing herself that it was equal by creating a half and half system. She would take care of the top “half” of the house, which was actually the entire house. And he would take care of the dog and the bottom “half” of the house, which was actually only the garage/basement. The only part of the garage that he did not have to take care of was, conveniently, the laundry section. What Nancy Holt actually did, was create what Hochschild calls a “family myth” (p.43). Hochschild states that many women create “myths” to deal with the inequalities they face in the home. Women find some way to twist the situation to convince them selves that it is fair (pp. 33-74).

### **Cause of Conflict**

The labor division in the home is an obvious cause for conflict since there are many women, like Nancy, who are unhappy doing most of the work. When they are asked about how

the labor of division in their home came to be the way it is, many responded with “it just ended up that way” (Bjornberg & Kollind, 2005, p.66). When women do try to change their situations, they are often met with more conflict because such a change may not be acceptable to their spouse. Their spouse’s resistance might be expressed with their “pure inability, open unwillingness, or a declared willingness to cooperate that does not translate into practice” (Bjornberg & Kollind, 2005, p.45).

Bjornberg and Kollind (2005) also reported that many women who do succeed in getting their husbands to participate in the housework are still disappointed because of their different concepts of cleanliness (p.44). For example, after my mother began working, she asked my father to help out with the chores. After much resistance, he eventually agreed to share some of the responsibility. But when my mother came back to a “clean” house, she was disappointed to find out that it was not at all up to her standards. He did things in a messy lackadaisical fashion and complained whenever criticized. After many arguments, my mother became so fed up with the situation that she eventually adopted the “if you want it done right, then do it your self” motto. This was probably my father’s way of showing resistance, but I am sure that there are other cases where people just do not agree on what is considered to be clean.

**Men: those who do and those who don’t.**

Men who resist do so for a variety of reasons. Women seem to have a higher perception of responsibility about the second shift, where as men feel it is more voluntary (Perkins & Demeis, 1996, p.13). Hochschild (1989) noted that some men claimed that there were simply accustomed to it because their mothers had always been the ones to clean up after them. Others simply feel that men *should* have more power and if they lose power over women in one way, they find have to find a way to make up for it. Out of the men who earned more money than their wives, only 21% shared the housework. Out of the men that earned about the same as their

wives, only 30% shared. And out of the men who earned less money than their wives, none shared (p. 221). Since more women have started careers of their own, not all men can use their financial power to gain immunity from the second shift, yet they still manage to avoid it.

There are, of course, some men who gladly participate in the housework. One man for example, really made it a point to help out around the home because he saw it as a sign of independence and respect. He felt a sense of pride knowing that he could take care of himself, manage his economy, and manage cleaning (Bjornberg & Kollind, 2005, p.49). Hochschild (1989) observed that the men who did help with the second shift were closer to their mothers. Most of the men she observed had absent or hostile fathers that they vowed not to be like (p.217). This suggests that a person's upbringing can have an effect on their attitudes towards the second shift.

### **The Effects on Children and Adolescents**

In my own opinion, one of the biggest issues of the second shift is the division of childcare. The time parents spend with their children is of paramount importance. According to Hochschild (1989), the absence or neglect of a parent can affect a child's grades, socialization skills, self esteem, and independence. This will be reflected in "the child as a child, in the child as an adult, and probably also in the child's own approach to fatherhood, and in generations of fathers to come" (p.237). From my own experience I believe that children who grow up with "bad" parents either grow up to make the same mistakes their parents made or they learn from them. Either way, I believe that the division of childcare should be equal; not only for the convenience of the parents, but for the sake of the child.

Another way the labor division in the home affects children is through what parents subconsciously teach them about gender roles. A journal in the Men's Studies Press stated that, "attitudes towards sex roles within the family are arguably formed early in the life course" (Male

Adolescents', 2006). Children are "trained" to take on certain roles with the toys that they are given, the clothing they are dressed in, and the games that they are encouraged to play. For example, the games girls play teaches them to be more nurturing and feminine (the mommy role), while the games that boys play teach them to be more competitive and masculine (Fujino lecture, Oct. 2006). It is common knowledge that children are impressionable beings and, like all people, they learn things through observation and experience.

Observing the way their family divides the labor in the home will influence the ideas the children have about roles in the family. For example, children who had fathers that did more "female-typed housework", were more likely to believe that men should contribute to household labor (Male Adolescents', 2006). Children's beliefs about labor division in the home are also affected by how much work that they are expected to perform while growing up. Kimmel (2004) wrote that "In almost every society, labor is divided by gender (as well as age)" (p. 52). Teens that have really busy moms do more housework in general, but daughters are expected to do more (Male Adolescents', 2006). When I was a child, my brother did more housework than I did because he was older than me. In this case, age was more important than gender, but when I grew older I was expected to do more than he was.

It was also reported that adolescents are influenced by the type of work that they are expected to do. In their study, they discovered that boys who were expected to do things like cleaning, food preparation, and laundry were more likely to share the second shift as adults. On the other hand, they discovered that boys who did more "do it yourself" tasks were less likely to help out around the house as men (Male Adolescents', 2006). This shows that the labor division that a couple has in their home not only affects them, but also leaves a solid impression on their children that will continue to affect future generations.

### **Finding a Balance**

“The issue of equality has been an integrated part of both national and international politics since the 1970’s” (Bjornberg & Kollind, 2005, p.7). But people have different definitions of equality and therefore, this can be a matter of personal preference. Some believe that equality means equal “time spent on household work, power and influence” (Bjornberg & Kollind, 2005, p.13). On the other hand, others do not believe that it is a matter of measuring, as long as the work performed by each person is considered to have equal value (Bjornberg & Kollind, 2005, p.13). Then how can families create a balance?

Wharton (1994) conducted a study on women working in real estate to explore flexible work schedules as a possible solution. The women found that the job proved to be more work than they expected, and they were disappointed to find out that they sometimes had to schedule their work around their client and not their family. These women were differed from those in Hochschild’s study because they did seem to be sharing more of the house work with their husbands. This might be because their flexible hours allowed them to make sure that their schedules did not over-lap with their husband’s. Non-overlapping schedules then allowed them to share the 2<sup>nd</sup> shift more equally (pp. 1-12).

Wharton (1994) concluded that “flexible work schedules have the greatest potential for helping workers balance work and family demands in occupations that don’t require commitment beyond fixed hours of work” (p.17). On the other hand, he also stated that this work arrangement did have negative consequences. Couples, for example would have to spend less time together since one was always working while the other one off. This also gives “second class standing for those workers who choose to limit their involvement” (p.17). While flexible scheduling did lead to a more equal division of the second shift, it is not enough to solve all the problems working women with families face.

Bjornberg and Kollind propose that a couple could also try to create a “contract oriented”



or a “needs oriented” division labor. In a “contract oriented” division, a couple sits down and has an open discussion over who should be responsible for certain tasks, and sometimes even create a schedule for when these tasks should be completed. In a “needs oriented” division, a couple does things in a more “natural” way. The idea is that if you see something that needs to be done, then you do it. This arrangement also allows both people to gain an overall knowledge on all the different household tasks (pp. 76-78)

Dividing up the housework is more complicated than just splitting everything in half. How can couples decide who should be in charge of what tasks? Bjornberg and Kollind write about four different “principles of justice behind the division of labor” (p.67). The first principle they mention is the “doing equal amounts” principle. According to this principle, both partners should be in charge of similar duties, both should put in the same effort in terms of time, but sometimes the equality in tasks is not important. (Bjornberg & Kollind, 2005, p.67). In this division, equality is mainly measured in terms of the amount of time and effort people put into the second shift.

Another way of dividing labor is using the “jointly shared responsibility” principle (p.69). The idea here is that both partners are conscious and responsible for whatever needs to be done, and then get it done. This cannot be measured in terms of time or sameness, but it is considered fair as long as both partners are doing something productive. It would not be fair for example, for one person to clean while the other watches television. Here, it is important for both partners to “display a priority of the common good” as well as to “take mutual needs into account” (Bjornberg & Kollind, 2005, p.70)

My personal favorite is the “Pleasure Principle”. Bjornberg and Kollind believe that a couple could make their work more equal by being considerate to the other person’s preferences. For example, if one person enjoys vacuuming then that person could be in charge of vacuuming.

They also suggest things like splitting the boring work and doing the fun work together or completing the boring work together as a way of making it more enjoyable (2005, pp.70-71). This is my favorite because if a person enjoys what they are doing, then it does not seem like work at all and therefore, the sameness in task or time is irrelevant.

The last suggestion that Bjornberg and Kollind make is the “being competent” principle. With this principle, assigning who does a certain task depends on who is better at doing it (2005, p.71). My father, for example, is definitely the better cook, and he consequently did most of the cooking. Another example would be if your wife happens to be an accountant then it would be logical for her to take care of the finances. These four principles can help couples divide the work in a way that will meet their own definition of equality and hopefully allow them to have a happier marriage.

### **This Generation**

Someone once told me that for this generation, “feminism is like fluoride; it’s just in the water”. I believe that this is fairly true because we have grown up learning about the women’s movement and other feminist issues. We are also very familiar with images of strong, independent, and professional women in the media. Because of this, I feel that this generation plans their family with the expectation that both partners will be working. According to Perkins and Demeis, the equalizing of the second shift is more likely to happen for women who are educated and working a full time job (1996, p.8). In order to explore this topic they conducted a study observing the division of labor between young educated adults.

In their study, Perkins and Demeis (1996) discovered that there are less gender differences in household activity between singles, couples living together, and married couples with out children. Although the division of labor is fairly equal between single roommates, the equality of the second shift decreased when people entered serious relationships. People tend to

take on more traditional roles as they get older, especially with the arrival of the first child. They reported that men worked an additional 5.66 hours a week with the presence of children, while women worked an additional 21.33 hours a week. Their results suggest that the second shift is not disappearing for young women once they are parents (Perkins & Demeis, 1996, pp. 10-12).

In a survey that I conducted in July of 2007, I wanted to determine what college students felt about the division of housework between their parents as well as their own situations with current roommates. I was also concerned with how students wanted to divide the housework in their own future family/marriage. About half of the students felt that the labor division of their parents was unfair. Most of them were content with the labor division in their own apartment even though they were not exactly fair. When asked about their future family situation, about sixty percent of them said that they wanted to have an equal distribution of housework. From this survey I learned that today's youth is more flexible about the traditional gender roles in the home, and that most would try to be more equal in the home than their parents. Many students believed that it was just a matter of being reasonable and finding a compromise. Although I would like to believe the responses I was given, I am aware that there might have been some "reporting biases, with men giving more socially desirable answers" (Male Adolescents', 2006).

### **My Own Opinion/ Conclusion**

Many people are not aware of how their lives are affected by gender because it is an everyday thing. It is clear that there is inequality in the labor division in the home and there have been attempts to change things. For example, some countries have a marriage contract which "mandates that husbands and wives share domestic responsibilities including housework and looking after children or elderly parents" (Zangor, 2006, p.1). This could be a step towards change, but I believe the best way to fight gender inequality in the home is through education of the problem. If I ever end up in the position of Nancy Holt, I hope that I do not give up the way

she did. Not only would it be unfair to me, but I would also be sending out the wrong message to my own children. Although it is cliché to say that children are the future, it is true and it is therefore important to set a good example. I believe this is especially true for boys because men are the ones who appear to show more resistance.

On the topic of how families can manage to make their home more egalitarian, I believe it is important to first determine what definition of equality you are trying to fulfill. It seems pretty obvious, but one of the most important parts of this all is to find the right spouse. It is important to find someone who has similar expectations and beliefs or else conflict will most definitely arise. As I explained before, for some people it is not about who does what or how much time you spend cleaning. One woman for example, said that she preferred doing most of the work because she liked the control and knowing where everything was and she enjoyed the image of being the center of the household (Bjornberg & Kollind, 2005, p.51). While I don't believe that the second shift is disappearing for women anytime soon, I believe that it is really just all about being happy with your situation.

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