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**BusinessWeek**

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OCTOBER 18, 2004

SOUND MONEY

By Christopher Farrell

## How Tech Helps Liberate Women

### Washing machines, frozen food, and other labor savers freed them to enter the workforce and determine their economic futures

I can almost hear half the population -- the female half -- scoff, "It's about time." A new Labor Dept. study reports that men are moving past the notion that household chores means merely taking out the garbage, mowing the lawn, and shoveling snow. In the last 25 years, men have increased their participation in household chores by some 50%, according to the long-term data collected by the Families & Work Institute.

True, on average, working women spend about 90 minutes a day on domestic chores, while for working men, the figure is about half that. The gap is still great, but the 50% improvement over the last quarter century represents substantial progress.

**WORKFORCE REVOLUTION.** In many ways it's still a man's world when it comes to the in the division of labor. And women struggle disproportionately to balance work and raise a family, let alone battle the glass ceiling and unequal pay policies.

Nevertheless, the labor-force participation rate among women with children is around 72%, up from 47% in 1975. Employers value educated workers in the New Economy, and that increasingly means women. They have been the majority of college students since 1979, and according to the Census Bureau, 56% of college students today are female.

"Since education is a key determinant of earnings, the income of women will rise relative to that of men, and the proportion of women with earnings greater than those of their spouse or potential spouse will also increase to unprecedented levels," writes Richard B. Freeman, a Harvard University labor economist, in *The Feminization of Work in the USA: A New Era of (Man)Kind?*

**ADAPTATIONS TO TECHNOLOGY.** Many factors contributed to this workforce revolution. Women flocked to the floor and the office pool during World War II. The civil-rights and feminist movements of the '60s opened up vast opportunities for women, as did an economy that increasingly valued brainpower over brawn. But the primary -- and often underappreciated -- driver behind the social revolution is technology advances in the home.

From the First Industrial Revolution to the Second Industrial Revolution to the Information Age, technological innovations have transformed the workplace. The same goes with the home. This was evident 40 years ago -- even before much of the technology we take for granted existed in any practical form.

Sociologist William Ogburn observed in 1964: "The various forms and shapes which our social institutions take and the many shifts in their function are a result of adjustments -- not to a changing natural environment, not to a changing biological heritage -- but adaptations to a changing technology."

**NO NEED FOR MARRIAGE.** Thanks to such labor savers as refrigerators, washing machines, dryers, microwave ovens, stain-resistant carpets, frozen foods, ready-made clothes, and a host of everyday electrical appliances, the time spent on household chores dropped from 58 hours a week in 1900 to just 18 hours per week by 1975, according to economists Jeremy Greenwood at the University of Rochester and Ananth Seshadri of the University of Wisconsin, Madison. That figure has probably drifted lower since then. The average person in the U.S. now spends about 12 to 13 hours a week on household chores, according to the Labor Dept. survey.

Little wonder, then, that married women could enter the labor market in droves. But technology also helped make being single economically feasible for women. Rising employment and wages for women made it easier to meet the cost of maintaining a home, say economists Jeremy Greenwood and Nezh Guner of Pennsylvania State University in *Marriage and Divorce Since World War II: Analyzing the Role of Technological Progress on the Formation of Households*.

It's ironic that the household is now so efficient many activities once looked upon as drudgery are now regarded as leisure. People spend hours in the kitchen trying out different recipes. Chains like Home Depot ([HD](#)) and Pottery Barn ([WSM](#)) have flourished thanks to people's interest in home repair and interior decoration. Perhaps just as women hungered for the satisfaction of working outside the home, men are taking greater pleasure in creating one.

**TRANSPORTATION LAGS.** Technology may yet bring about another vast change in the house, again merging the workplace and the home. Before 1750, most workers in Western Europe labored exclusively in their homes -- the household and the plant were the same. Economic historian Joel Mokyr has argued that a primary force behind the rise of the factory system was that it turned out to be more cost-efficient to move people to one place and impart vital technical and economic knowledge there rather than transmit it into many homes.

The Internet is changing that. If companies can manage high-skilled workers in such far-flung outposts of the global economy such as India and China, why not in homes scattered in inner cities and suburbia around the country?

Indeed, the Internet is a revolutionary communications technology that has sharply lowered the cost of speeding information to the home. So do cell phones, BlackBerrys, and all the other tech gadgets of the Information Age.

**WEAKENING THE "FACTORY".** Meanwhile, no improvements have been made in the technology of getting people to and from work, a deadweight burden on the economy. The ranks of telecommuters has been growing in recent years, but the trend may well be in its infancy. "Modern communications and information technology are weakening the many advantages that the 'factory' has had over the household," says Mokyr.

Maybe employers will start offering a cleaning service as an employee benefit.

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