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TASTE COMMENTARY

Happiness and Housework

The division of chores does not cause much marital discord after all.

BY KARLYN BOWMAN

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In 1969, when budding British sociologist Ann Oakley went to register her thesis on the attitudes and work satisfaction of British housewives, her colleagues reacted in disbelief: "Why would anyone study housework?" But the young mother of two persevered. Oakley, like Betty Friedan, her better-known counterpart in the U.S., found housework "deeply alienating."

Today, the views of Oakley and Friedan reverberate throughout the academic literature and in many quarters of popular press as well. In a piece written after Friedan's death last month, Judith Warner, author of "The Perfect Madness: Motherhood in the Age of Anxiety," argued that the "gender caste system" is alive and well in most households. Housework isn't shared, so the feminist revolution "remains incomplete." Life outside the home has changed for most women, she said, but home life has not.

Ms. Warner, like many academics in this field, starts with the assumption that the unequal division is a problem and that perpetuates gender oppression. But for most people, the imbalance isn't a serious problem at all.

In surveys conducted over a 25-year period for Virginia Slims, no more than 15% of married couples or those living together ever told Roper interviewers that they "frequently" disagreed with their spouse on how the house is kept. There was more disagreement about whether to spend or save and about families and in-laws than there was about what men's responsibilities at home should be or how clean the house was. Fewer than 10% of women, answering another question, said they often felt resentful about "how much my mate helps around the house" (another three in 10 said they felt this from time to time). In a study out last week from the University of Virginia, the authors note that "almost two-thirds of married women report that they are happy with the division of housework, but most of these women also do the majority of chores around the home."



Ultimately, though, resentment may well be less common these days because less time is spent on chores and their nature has changed.

How different housework was in the old days. In an article in Good Housekeeping in 1912, Thomas Alva Edison predicted that, with the miracle of electricity, women would "give less attention to the home, because the home will need less." At the turn of the century, less than 10% of dwellings had electricity. According to the University of Rochester's Jeremy Greenwood and his colleagues, "the average household lugged around the home 7 tons of coal and 9,000 gallons of water each year." Doing laundry was especially time-consuming and onerous since water had to be brought into the home, then heated. Clothes were washed and then wrung out by hand or mechanical machines. Irons had to be heated continuously to finish the job. Today the process of cleaning clothes is so easy that, according to Procter & Gamble, American households do more than 1,000 loads every second.

But even with the labor-saving devices that electricity made possible and fewer children to clean up

after, time spent on housework did not decline in the first half of the 20th century. Northwestern's Joel Moky offers an interesting explanation: Advances in understanding disease transmission at the turn of the last century "persuaded women that household members' health depended on the amount of housework carried out" and caused them to spend more time cleaning to keep germs at bay. The popular home-economics movement in the early 20th century sprang from concern about the spread of disease.

As antibiotics became more common, public-health regulations more strict and sanitary habits more routine, the disease worry began to fade. And all the while technology was easing the burden of housework. Between 1965 and 1995, the time spent on domestic labor declined dramatically. Four researchers steeped in time-use studies found that women cut their housework hours nearly in half, from about 30 hours a week to about 17. In the same period, men's housework time more than doubled, from slightly more than four hours a week to 10. By the mid-1990s, men were doing about a third of the total housework. (More recent data suggest that mother's work at home has plateaued.) The median square footage of privately owned homes today is 1,800, up from 1,385 in 1970, so it's a safe bet that our houses wouldn't meet the white-glove test of an earlier era.



If women are doing less and we've defined dirt down, a husband's smaller contribution may not be a problem. This is especially true if, as the surveys suggest, women care more about household cleanliness than men do. In a Harris/Whirlpool study, 15% of women, but only 2% of men, said that having a clean and orderly house made them feel "successful at home."

Many major household decisions are shared equally today, and this may diminish resentment about areas where the division of responsibility is lop-sided. In Roper's data, virtually identical numbers of men and women reported that they made decisions equally about the selection of a home or residence, vacation plans, and savings and investments. It is also true that a large proportion of women and men continue to have what academics scornfully refer to as "traditional gender ideologies." In a Radcliffe/Fleet

Boston study, 97% of 21- to 29-year-old women said that they expected their partner to work outside the home. Of their male counterparts, only 69% gave that response. The persistence of traditional attitudes probably explains why chores aren't a big source of familial disputes and also why sex segregation in chores (women do laundry, men take out the trash) remains robust.

Finally, chores themselves are being transformed yet again. Far from the ordeals of yesteryear, or even the manageable semi-ordeals of the day before yesterday, they have become a source of pleasure and relaxation, perhaps because they are now seen as a break from job-related angst.

Before the vice president and his wife had the perks that come with the job, Dick Cheney did most of the cooking in the household, according to his wife, Lynn. He found it relaxing, she says. A majority of women in a Hart/Shell poll reported that cooking reduced stress at the end of a tough day. In the poll, 49% of nonretired people described cooking as a chore they had to do, but nearly as many (44%) described it as a leisure activity they wanted to do. Slightly more than a third describe cooking as something they especially like to do, up from about 20% a decade before. A 2002 profile of House Democratic Leader Nancy Pelosi, from the Washington Post, said that she makes a "sacrament out of ironing," another chore that is relaxing for some. About 20% of people rate doing chores around the house or in the yard (think of George W. Bush and Ronald Reagan clearing brush) as their favorite weekend activities.

Cheryl Mendelson's "Home Comforts," a tome on household arts, enjoyed a warm reception from the reading public a few years ago. In it she writes that housekeeping creates "cleanliness, order, regularity, [and] beauty" in our lives. It is true that not everyone will find chores so glamorous, but, pace some feminists, a broom is no longer a tool of patriarchal oppression.

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