

Overworked, overextended and overstressed [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

The numbers are in. Women are working more than ever: They make up almost 47% of the labor force, a figure that may now be even higher due to a disproportionate number of male layoffs this year. Most American moms are working, too--at least 71% as of 2006.

At the same time, women still do most of the work at home. A recent survey of 12,000 women in 21 nations by global management consulting firm the Boston Consulting Group (BCG), released in conjunction with the book *Women Want More*, shows that about 85% of women claim responsibility for the grocery shopping, meal preparation, laundry and household cleaning.

The double burden of job and home demands leaves them stressed and pressed for time, with 45% responding they don't have enough time for themselves.

Why does this household inequality persist while women continue to advance in business and higher education? The experts say it boils down to three things: earning power, ingrained social patterns and structural policies.

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Silverstein talked to women of all backgrounds and pored over the data from the thousands of survey respondents in an attempt to drill in to the core of women's lives. He wasn't surprised to find one global truth--men don't pitch in equally. That holds true even among Gen X and Gen Y males, he says, noting that adult children continue to copy patterns enacted by their parents.

Silverstein, however, envisions "enormous" change in the next 10 years. Because women today are excelling in school at levels beyond men, he believes an earnings shift in her favor will transform these outdated models.

"Women are beginning to say 'participate or leave,'" he says, noting that 30% of women in the study responded that they had serious doubts whether they'd still be with the same partners five years from now. It's evidence, says Silverstein, that more economically powerful Gen-Y women will opt for singledom or new relationships if their current partners aren't pulling their weight.

Mount Holyoke College psychology professor Francine M. Deutsch specializes in the division of household labor and has also noticed that unequal earning plus young children at home exacerbates domestic inequality. "It's a vicious cycle," she says. "After childbirth, women start to reduce their time in the labor force, and his job becomes more important, which makes the home central to her."

The BCG survey came to similar conclusions, finding that single women were the only group that prioritized themselves first. Wives ranked their husbands' needs first after marriage, and children as their top priority after childbirth. Once children left home, husbands resumed the No. 1 spot. Additionally, happiness levels for women nosedive after marriage and begin to climb again only after children are self-sufficient.

As expectations change and women force different behavior patterns, shared responsibility at home will be the norm, says Deutsch.

"Women have to demand equality, and men have to have a sense of fairness."

Anthony Loreda possesses such a fairness meter. He lives with his executive wife Stephanie in Jersey City, N.J., with a toddler and another baby on the way. He regularly washes dishes, does laundry and makes daycare drop-offs and pick-ups. He credits his background (growing up with three sisters) and because otherwise, he says, "I'd totally feel guilty if I wasn't doing my fair share."

His wife adds that he often takes care of even more than that because she sometimes works very long hours.

Brown University professor of psychiatry and human behavior Scott Haltzman, MD, says women feel more pressure to take charge at home and prioritize housework. "They set the standard in the household about cleanliness," he says, "and often find that men don't meet their standards." He's found that this leads many women to criticize men's efforts or take over completely.

If women begin to do less themselves and expect more from their partners, they'd be much happier, he concludes.

Michelle Clark Fry, the director of creative services at a communications firm, and her husband, a truck driver, are a winning example. She and her husband both work full time, though her workday is about two hours longer. Before their first child, she says she did about 65% of the housework. After her child was born, she made clear that she didn't want to be in the lead. Now she takes charge of about 55% of the work.

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BCG's Silverstein believes this kind of change will have to occur in individual households and broader structures via government and company policies. "Sweden is the role model," he says. It tops the charts as the country closest to gender neutrality, including equal household responsibility.

Silverstein attributes this parity to structural policies like longer periods of paid parental leave, inexpensive day-care and university education, and progressive business requirements that make it easier for couples to stand on equal footing. He hopes that in the future, U.S. businesses and government will make similar strides. "This is a call to action," he says. "We can relieve the burden on women."

- reprinted from Forbes

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