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Cleaning: The Final Feminist Frontier

Why men still don't do their share of the dirty work.

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When it comes to housecleaning, my basically modern, egalitarian marriage starts looking more like the backdrop to an Updike short story. My husband and I both work. We split midnight baby feedings. My husband would tell you that he does his fair share of the housework, but if pressed, he will admit that he's never cleaned the bathroom, that I do the dishes nine times out of ten, and that he barely knows how the washer and dryer work in the apartment we've lived in for over eight months. Sure, he changes the light bulbs and assembles the Ikea furniture, but he's never scrubbed a toilet in the six years we've lived together.

This is not just our issue. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, about 55 percent of American mothers employed full time do some housework on an average day, while only 18 percent of employed fathers do. Even if you control for the fact that moms with full-time jobs tend to work fewer hours than dads with full time jobs (as studies have), working women with children are still doing a week and a half more of "second shift" work each year than their male partners.¹

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Furthermore, when you look at the granular data from time-use studies, the housework men actually do is both more gendered and less frequent than the housework women do. Fathers do slightly more lawn care than moms—11 percent of working dads are out mowing the lawn on an average day compared to 6.4 percent of working moms. So that means dads are out clipping the hedges on sunny Saturdays, while moms are the ones doing the drudgery of vacuuming day in and day out. And this isn't solely an American phenomenon. Even in the famously gender-neutral Sweden, women do 45 minutes more housework a day than their male partners.

To be fair, men do far more cleaning now than they did in the Eisenhower era. But when you look at the advances women have made in getting men to share other domestics tasks—childcare, cooking—cleaning is still very much women's work (though it's worth noting

that men still don't do as much childcare and cooking as women do). The fact that it's more than OK—cool even—for men to take on pretty much any domestic tasks *but* cleaning is everywhere in the wider culture. Louis C.K., one of the most popular stand-ups in the country, has constructed his entire identity around fatherhood and is still seen as masculine and hilarious. Ben Affleck is photographed carting his two daughters around a Los Angeles farmers market and the world swoons. There is a new magazine called *Kindling Quarterly* that looks like an Anthropologie catalog and bills itself as an “exploration of fatherhood.” Anthony Bourdain, Momofuku's David Chang, and the Voltaggio brothers of “Top Chef” fame have made cooking synonymous with trash mouths and tattoos. Men with brawny arms host butchering classes in Middle America and *Popular Mechanics* has written a beginners guide to brewing beer.

Which is all to say, it's seen as socially admirable and masculine for a man to be on diaper duty or to sous-vide a steak, but there are no closet organizing tips in the pages of *Esquire*, no dishwasher detergent ads in the pages of *GQ*. Considering the strides that have been made in getting men to share the labor in other traditionally female domestic areas, why has cleaning remained the final frontier?

At its most basic, a reason why a lot of men don't want to clean is obvious: it's not fun. The rewards of the other two traditionally female household tasks—childcare and cooking—are palpable. Your kid's smile, a delicious meal. But not so with cleaning. and Tsui-o Tai looked at household task hierarchies among men in 32 different countries, they found that men all over the world will forego laundry over all other traditionally female tasks—they're much more likely to care for a sick spouse or child or go grocery shopping.

But this is only a very partial explanation. Disaggregating all the factors that go into making women more inclined to clean than men is a headachey, complex, chicken-egg, nature-nurture project. But looking at some of the practical reasons and the theories behind this disparity might just give us some of the tools to shift it.

To start, nearly all of the ads for cleaning products feature women and are designed to appeal to women. According to a 2008 study from the University of New Hampshire, only about 2 percent of commercials featuring men showed them doing domestic tasks. Even Tide, which has recently featured a stay-at-home dad in a few commercials, uses ads that emphasize the dad part rather than the cleaning part—like this one, where a father is sweetly washing his daughter's favorite princess dress. Ads like that, according to P&G North America Fabric Care Brand Manager, Matthew Krehbiel, are meant to appeal to the 17 percent of men who are the primary grocery shoppers and launderers. But that's a small slice of the overall market, and so it makes sense that it's not the marketer's priority. This aspect of cultural messaging is a self-perpetuating tautology: The vast majority of detergent purchasers are women, and so marketers feature more women in the ads.

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In a phone interview, Arlie Hochschild, the author of *The Outsourced Self* and the foundational feminist text on women and housework, *The Second Shift*, makes the argument that a women's desire for a clean home has deeper origins than just marketing. Cleaning, Hoschild says, is not simply physical work. It's emotional work. "Letting the house go is in a way letting something deeper go. ... You get a sense of safety in an orderly home," Hochschild says.

But assuming both parties care about creating a sense of safety in the home, why does it fall to women? I suspect that women are more driven to keep a clean house because they know they—before their male partners—will be judged for having a dirty one. When I lived with two female roommates, I was much more of a slob. None of us was particularly responsible for the emotional tone of that apartment—no single one of us was more likely to be shunned for the state of our bathroom. But when I got married, the dust bunnies hopping across our floor started seeming like a personal affront. Although it was my husband's father coming over, I was the one who insisted we clean. I was worried I would be judged for the beef jerky wrappers (on both aesthetic and gustatory grounds), despite the fact that my father-in-law has never once made a peep about the state of our abode. Somewhere lodged within me was the message that it was my responsibility.

Unfortunately, the notion that women will be the first to be judged for a messy home and the first to be commended for an orderly one isn't much of an incentive for men to pick up a mop. In the instances in which men actually do the majority of the housework in their partnership, women are still the ones getting credit. David Michael Perez, the publisher and editor of *Kindling Quarterly*, says that though he does more decorating and cleaning than his spouse does, "often when people say 'your house is nice,' it's directed more at my wife." If they're not even going to be rewarded for it, why bother at all?

With all these obstacles to real gender parity of chores, what's a working woman to do? Philosophy professor Alexandra Bradner suggests on the *Atlantic's* website that couples sit down with a list of questions like, "Do I do half of the laundry and half of the dishes every day?" to figure out where they're slacking off in comparison to their mate. This sounds exhausting and impractical. If I do one load of laundry, it's easier for me to do the second rather than wait for my husband to mosey over. (Bradner also says that when men do traditionally female chores, they're enacting "'small instances of gender heroism,' or 'SIGH's"—which, barf.)

I'm much more inclined to take the advice of Jenny Anderson, the co-author of *It's Not You, It's the Dishes*, which applies economic theory to household tasks. A lot of women shoo their husbands away from cleaning because they know the men will do a sub-par job of scrubbing the sink. Anderson says you should divide up tasks according to the economic theory of comparative advantage. Let's say a woman is twice as good as her husband at doing the laundry, but only 20 percent better than her husband at doing the dishes. In that couple, the husband should always do the dishes. What's more, he'll get better at it through repetition.

Another solution is for women to lower their filth thresholds. Did I really need to clean up the house for my father-in-law? Would he have cared if there were a few glasses sitting out on the kitchen table? Probably not. But it's harder to stomach this fix once you have children, when the threat of a Fisher Price plastic hell-scape is perpetually around the corner. One of the women I interviewed for this piece, who doesn't want to publicly shame her husband, said that when she came home after a weekday night out, it was so messy that it looked like she had 40 kids instead of two. If she had left the living room like that, it wouldn't have been very good hygiene modeling for her kids (and, at some point, might get social services called).

One last suggestion comes from Magary, who so emphatically declared that cleaning sucks: make cleaning more fun. He says that when the Swiffer first came on the market, it was sort of enticing. (Swiffer reps said they had no information to share with me about men and cleaning.) "We like gadgets and stuff," Magary explains. "If there was some new electronic hovering Apple product that cleaned the bathroom, I'd try it." Are you listening out there in Cupertino? You have a huge, untapped market on your hands for toilet-scrubbing iPods. I bet my husband would buy one.