

# Media portrayal of gender roles in the household



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## The Right Man for the Job

She suddenly snaps. Her infant accidentally bursts open her bottle and floods the car with milk, she jams on her brakes and parks her car in the middle of the bridge, blocking traffic. The police try to convince her to move her car, to no avail. The news reports “ An overworked and underappreciated housewife... has parked on the bridge, refusing to budge.” A crowd has gathered to observe the scene, some extend their sympathies: “ Sweetheart, what’s the matter?” and “ Not getting enough of the good stuff?” Finally, her husband arrives and convinces her to get out of the car, and she is promptly arrested by the police. There’s a debate between the Mayor and the police chief on if the city should press charges or not. The Mayor, concerned about the optics of the situation, flatly states “ I can kiss the chick vote good-bye... and if I go down, you’re breaking my fall!”

This is the opening for “ Homer Alone”, an episode of the Simpsons in which Marge, the quintessential housewife suffers a nervous breakdown and takes some time away from the chaos of family life, leaving Homer in the role of caretaker for the house and their infant daughter. In their investigation into the topic of masculinity in the media, Ronald Jackson and Jamie Moshin find that shows like “ *The Simpsons* can function as witty satires regarding American myths of normalcy and desirability in the public and private spheres.” (184)

The media’s portrayal of the masculine role in the household has evolved over the decades, much of the time keeping pace with the general social trends. The post war show *Father Knows Best* , described by TV Guide as “ a

normal, intelligent businessman controlling his family sensibly, even wisely” and as a “ classic example of American Pop Culture at its best” an idealized nuclear family with the patriarch providing for his stay at home wife, teaching their children to play catch, but if a situation required emotions, it was “ go talk to your mother”. These tropes in the gave way to more multicultural families such as *The Cosby show* as the Reagan years approached. In the 90’s, we had *Roseanne* a glance into the lower middle class, blue collar dual income family’s struggles. These TV father’s roles became less of the “ father-knows-best” stereotype and more involved roles as caregivers, taking active roles in their children’s lives and being equal partners in the decisions of the household. Despite this progress the media has made in showing men to be at least capable of sharing childcare burdens, men depicted in the media are showing to be essentially domestically-illiterate. The everyday activities, such as cooking, washing, cleaning, shopping for own household, caring for the elderly, the sick, and the disabled are still shown to be primarily “ women’s work”.

The US Department of Labor, Women’s Bureau reports that “ since 1940, the percent of women participating in the labor force the increased from just 24.3 percent 47 percent of the total U. S. labor force, and are projected to account for 51 percent of the increase in total labor force growth by 2018.” Similarly, the US Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics tells us that “ In 1967, 49 percent of mothers were stay-at-home mothers. That proportion steadily dropped through the decades until 1999, when only 23 percent of moms stayed at home.” The fight for Women’s equality in political, economic, and social spheres has made great progress, however

the division of household labor remains virtually unchanged. Domestic work and childcare are still seen as primary responsibilities of the women. After their shifts at work are completed, women are expected to complete chores and childcare. This double-burden was dubbed the “ second shift” by American sociologist and academic Arlie Russell Hochschild in her book *The Second Shift*, written in 1989.

Hochschild found that “ working women averaged three hours a day on housework while men averaged 15 minutes” (259) Though nearly 20 years has passed since the publication, there has been little change in the balance of housework between male and female households. Theodore Greenstine’s 2005 study found that “ In general, regardless of income, education, ideology, or extent of paid employment, women tend to do far more domestic labor than their male partners” (1039).

Media’s portrayal of the working mother has rarely been accurate, as Hotchschild describes an advertisement she presented to working mothers during interviews:

She is not the same women in each magazine advertisement, but she is the same idea. She has that working mother look as she strides forward, briefcase in one hand, smiling child in the other. Literally and figuratively, she is moving ahead. Her hair, if long, tosses behind her; if it is short, it sweeps back at the sides, suggesting mobility and progress. There is nothing shy or passive about her. She is confident, active, “ liberated”. She wears a dark tailored suit, but with a sick bow or colorful frill that says, “ I’m really

feminine underneath." She has made it in a man's world without sacrificing her femininity. And she has done this on her own. (258)

It's not only advertisements that sell the idea of a " Super-mom", but the stories of " Celebrity Moms" that dominate tabloid magazines, television, movies, and now social media that not only delegitimize the labor involved in housework, but also reinforce both the gendered stereotypes of who is responsible for the work, and the ease in which the work is completed.

Women as consumers is not a new idea. P&G productions, producers of the soap opera " As the World Turns", spanned for 72 years and over 10, 000 episodes, chiefly marketed towards women. P&G productions is a subsidiary of Procter & Gamble, an American multinational consumer goods company and makers of Swiffer, Tide and Bounce, who spend nearly \$10 billion per year advertising budget. Product placement in women's media isn't just a happy coincidence, PQ Media, a media research company found that " Product placements were worth \$6. 01 billion, up 12. 8% from the previous year, the fifth straight year of growth. PQ Media projects that product placement revenue will reach \$11. 44 billion in 2019." Globally, women account for \$20 trillion in annual consumer spending. Most of the income growth in the U. S. during the past 15 to 20 years is attributed to women, per the television consumer specialist firm Nielsen.

The media doesn't only focus on the perceived stereotypical women's role as housekeeper, but often puts its female characters into traditionally feminine roles. In TV Guides list of best TV shows for the past year, the trend continues. *The Walking Dead* shows us that even in the zombie post

apocalypse, women are the ones performing the childcare, nursing, preparation of food and forming community ties. Additionally, there's Penny in *The Big Bang Theory*. Penny, a waitress (typical female job) is shown to be living in a one bedroom apartment in LA, near a prestigious college. Most of her role in the series to function as a catalyst for the lead characters' lack of social lives. As the show progressed, the other character's girlfriends are seen in having successful, professional careers, but are still expected to fill the emotive role in the relationship.

An egregious example of this is Carrie Bradshaw of *Sex & the City*. A struggling journalist is seen living an extravagant life, living in the upper east side of New York City. These women shown living above their means perpetuate what is considered an "ideal life", contributing to the feminization of poverty. This phenomenon is described in United Nation reports revealing that there are 1.5 billion people living on 1 dollar a day or less, the majority of which are women. In addition, the gap between women and men caught in the cycle of poverty has continued to widen in the past decade.

"While women earn on average seventy-seven cents for every dollar earned by men, they are disproportionately concentrated in the lowest-paying fields. Furthermore, most the pay gap between men and women actually comes from differences within occupations, not between them and this gap widens in the highest-paying occupations such as business, law, and medicine" (S. Pressman, The Shriver Report)

One might think that such a significant economic impact would lead to more progressive representations in the media, however this does not seem to be the case. Advertisements, both televised and otherwise, very rarely show housewives or mothers outside of their stereotypical gender roles. The “pick them back up” add, produced by our friends at P&G productions, was heavily broadcast during the 2014 Sochi Olympic Winter Games. Mya Frazier observes that “Men are unmentioned, even if their breadwinner status is implicit: What working mother could devote herself solely to the making of an Olympian without substantial financial support?” (Frazier).

The question of “where is dad?” can be answered by considering other media. A meta-analysis shows that the odds of women being depicted at home (vs. at work) are approximately 3.5 times higher than for men (qtd. in Jörg et. al). These gender stereotypes are nearly ubiquitous across not only American media, but society in general. Webster dictionary defines our idea of gender as the role or behavior learned by a person as appropriate to their gender are determined by the prevailing cultural norms. The perceived femininity or masculinity of a task is equally as culturally subjective. “The hegemonic frame tends to constitute a ‘good’ father as the responsible breadwinner/provider and protector gender identity for men has traditionally been associated with the competitive rationality of work rather than the intimate emotionality of family. (J. Gentry and R. Harrison, 77). This hegemony is reinforced by our real-life experiences, mass media exposure, and the ever-present social media feeds. “Traditionally” feminine” tasks such as cooking, laundry, and cleaning are overwhelmingly performed by women; traditionally ” masculine” tasks such as yard work and auto

maintenance tend to be done by men” (T. Greenstein, 1039). With the Simpson’s family , the fault of the self-destructive pragmatic “ Family First” idea that sends Marge over the edge. The husband and forever needy kids who will never appreciate her were hardly subtle ideas, even in a comedic or satirical format.

In media, when the gender roles are reversed, how often is it successful? We often see the TV dad portrayed as inept, typically uninvolved or uncaring, unless the situation calls for a sardonic wit, then TV dad is your man. Among the worst offenders, we have Al Bundy of *Married with Children* , a blue-collar-everyman who either by laziness or ineptitude is completely absent from any domestic labor or parenting duties, unless they call for violence or a punchline. While satirical, the presentation of the masculine role in the family is to provide the paycheck, grumble, and be the butt of the joke.

The inability or failure when gender roles are reversed is also a common trope. The Tim Taylor’s ( *Home Improvement* ) and to a lesser extent Phil Dunphy ( *Modern Family* ) all reflect the masculine breadwinner who may find themselves in an occasional feminized role, only to learn that they woefully under equipped to deal with the task at hand. While Marge Simpson was relaxing in a resort after her nervous breakdown, Homer struggled with even the most basic of household chores, inevitably getting drunk with his bar-fly best buddy Barney and losing Maggie in the process. (Homer Alone)

Even in the TV homes where there was a closer semblance to equality when it came to social, political or economic issues, we would rarely any flexibility or male “ housewifization” (househusbandization?). Dan Conner (Roseanne)



was shown in a more active role in the parenting of his children -but the shows namesake was the primary housekeeper, child raiser, and do-it-all blue-collar mom - a much better representation of the “ second shift” idea. Cliff Huxtable (The Cosby Show) and his wife Clair were equals, but the gender roles were never questioned. Despite the forward progression and increased airtime of a less oafish and more, helpful father, research has consistently indicated that husbands are not doing much more housework than they ever did (although they are on a relative basis, as wives are doing much less; (qtd. Robinson and Godbey, 1997)

Typically, its only representations of single fathers like Danny Tanner (Full House) that are not only shown in the “ house husband” role, but are not failing at it. Only by not having a wife or mother in the house to fall back on, would the male take on the traditionally feminine tasks. In James Gentry and Robert Harrison’s study of gender portrayals in the media, they found that single fathers needed to redefine their masculinity as they become involved parents. Traditionally (or at least in the 20th century), only one form of masculinity was conceived; this masculinity is non-feminine (or anti-feminine), independent, heterosexual (or ‘ anti-homosexual’), tough, and takes risks” (qtd, 79).

The persistence of gendered labor inequality within the home is caused in part by the reluctance of men to participate in the lesser-valued roles that women perform and to avoid being “ emasculated” by performing “ women’s work.” For example, in *The Second Shift*, Hochschild describes the division of household labor between Nancy and Evan, married parents of one child who both worked full-time. Evan refused to share the housework equally with his

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wife, feeling that this was not his responsibility as a man and that he was entitled to refuse to participate in tasks that he saw as his wife's (261).

This suggests that at their core, men are psychologically predisposed to reject housework due to its apparent femininity, an idea that mass media has all but reflected and marketed back to consumers. The difference being that in the media examples, there is rarely a cost to only one parent working the "second shift". When it comes to dual income families, Rebecca J. Rosen of *The Atlantic* writes "The statistics on this are a bit of a mess, as moms and dads report different household divisions of labor, both when it comes to chores and parenting. Dads are more likely to see the division as equal, and it can be tricky business to sort out who's right".

While it's unlikely that there is a shadowy cabal of men and fathers looking to shrug off their housework to their presumably exhausted wives by influencing mass media outlets, the perception of inequality at home is a tricky subject. Greenstein explores this idea:

Just as differences in gender ideology (at the individual level) have been found to lead women to different choices of comparative referents and consequently to reach different conclusions about the fairness of the division of household labor, national context provides a comparative referent for married women from which they might form their perceptions of justice relevant to the division of household labor. I propose that women not only compare themselves to other individuals when making determinations of fairness or justice but that they also compare themselves to the more generalized conception of the level of support for gender equity in their

nation. That is, women who perceive a high level of support for gender equity in their generalized comparative referent- for example, their perception of the beliefs of the people in their nation or society-are more likely to perceive microlevel inequalities as inequities (1040).

If ideals of fairness or inequality are founded in the perception of what is happening in others' lives, then what we see in the media must be included in that. If there were more Rosanne's and less Peg Bundy's, would women feel more shortchanged by the division of household labor. If the they (the media, or shadowy cabal of lazy men) could show men performing reproductive labor without appearing emasculated, would that change things? It's not as if the advertising and entertainment is completely bereft of positive household-male examples. After the " Pick Them Back Up" ad ran during the Sochi Olympic, they produced a similar ad directed towards males. Unfortunately, " it was a social media non-starter. Consider the forgettable 2013 " Power of Dads" Oral-B spot. It offers a succession of heartwarming clips of dads joyfully engaged with their children, but didn't exactly burn up the viral charts. An ad about a stay-at-home dad doing laundry for Tide? A measly 60, 000 views on YouTube." (M. Frazier)

We can plainly see that it was ingratitude and an unequal share of work that led to Marge Simpson breaking down on a bridge, going ballistic was a cry for help that could resonate with anybody who's work has been chronically underappreciated, even the police woman taking Marge's mug shot gives her the sisterly empathy, " Off the record, ma'am. All the girls on the force knew just how you felt" (Homer Alone). If the lesson was to show how we underappreciate the women in our lives, the return to normalcy at the end of <https://assignbuster.com/media-portrayal-of-gender-roles-in-the-household/>

sitcoms is the undoing of any lesson or basis for comparative basis. Ronald Jackson and Jamie Moshin quote “ In these spaces, however, the critiques of dominant norms fall short when the characters return to their traditional roles at the conclusion of the episodes.” (qtd. 184). Without the continuity of lessons learned, there is no real impact. In the next episode, Homer and the kids are right back to their scheming, lazy, and unappreciative selves. Marge’s breakdown, subsequent catharsis has meant nothing.

It’s not all hopeless, the gap in the division of household labor is slowly closing. The status quo has protected male privilege, but it’s not permeant. The ultra-masculine western cowboy is now seen as nothing more than a cultural relic (J. Gentry and R. Harrison, 98). Fathers depicted in Arnold Schwarzenegger in the 80’s was killing entire private militias in the movie *Commando* then in the 90s he was performing literal reproductive labor in *Junior*. Our views of what emotional value labor holds and if our ideas about masculine and feminine work can change. If Homer Simpson can, even for a short while, perhaps the rest of us can too.

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