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Gender Inequality in Childcare

Compared to 30 years ago, men are more involved in childcare today. Although some societal norms surrounding childcare have evolved, there is still much to be desired regarding the distribution of childcare in a heterosexual marriage. Many negative aspects of our society feed this practice which leads to women being burdened with most childcare responsibilities and making sacrifices in their lives men are not expected to make. Additionally, women are pressured to fulfill societal expectations of being the perfect wife, mother, and professional. This is an unrealistic task which women are expected to complete within the constraints of a rigid gender ideology.

Distribution of childcare responsibilities is unequal because men are less likely than women to make sacrifices in their professional life. Yet many women make sacrifices in their professional and personal lives that men do not make and are not expected to make. In their article from the *American Sociological Review*, “How Mothers and Fathers Share Childcare: A Cross-National Time-Use Comparison”, Lyn Craig and Killian Mullan explore how and why childcare is divided in the household. We would expect as time spent at work increases, time spent on childcare decreases, and the inverse to be true if time spent at work fell. The authors find this is not the case for the working mother. Instead, when the working mother begins to spend more time at work she sacrifices the time that would have been spent on relaxation, personal matters, and sleep to make up for the lost time spent on childcare (Craig and Mullan 835). Similarly, Arlie Russell Hochschild explores the sacrifices made by a mother in raising a child with a look into the marriage of Evan and Nancy Holt in her book, *The Second Shift*. Evan and Nancy Holt are a couple with a young boy. They experience problems because Nancy

shoulders most domestic responsibilities. In the chapter, Hochschild notes that Evan's perspective on his wife's professional life was that he "thought it was fine for Nancy to have a career, if she could handle the family too" (Hochschild 36). Evan seeks to define the parameters of her life. There is no mention of his career in relation to his responsibilities to the family. Like many men, Evan places most of the childcare duties on his wife, but takes no responsibility of his own. He expects her to place priority on childcare and household tasks instead of her career.

One reason Evan has developed this perspective is that he is a product of a culture where we define success and power in material ways. A certain value is ascribed to the domestic sphere that make it seem less important compared to the public sphere. Value is ascribed to the positions in society that attain some tangible benefit. Little value is given to home-makers and stay-at-home moms because they do not receive any tangible compensation for their work (Craig and Mullen 835). Because Evan makes more money than his wife, he has a higher value in society. In her article, "Why Women Still Can't Have it All", Anne-Marie Slaughter touches upon this same point when she explains, "Workers who put their careers first are typically rewarded; workers who choose their families are overlooked, disbelieved, or accused of unprofessionalism" (Slaughter). Value is placed on careers, but not on family care. Workplace structures on economic and family policy enforce this view with little concessions being made for parental leave and funded childcare. These policies often leave women disadvantaged when they return to work and do not compensate women enough for the time they spend raising children.

Women feel the brunt of most childcare responsibilities because unattainable expectations are placed on women to fulfill unrealistic role of the supermom. But it is interesting that women also participate in reinforcing this practice by displaying their disappointment with condescending and disappointing tones when they refer to women who have sacrificed either

work for family or family for work. This reaction questions the commitment of women to either their professional lives or their family. Heightened expectations of childcare in general have overshadowed reaching gender equality in childcare arrangements (Craig and Mullan 836). It is a zero sum game that women deal with every day of their lives. A select few women manage to successfully manage a high-level career and also take on most childcare responsibilities. These women are gifted with either money or makes sacrifices in other aspects of their lives. Instead of being seen as the exception, they are set as the standard for all other women to follow. If a woman falls short of this impossible expectation they often feel guilt about not meeting an ideal of the perfect mother, wife, professional, etc. In her article, Anne-Marie Slaughter discusses this phenomena happening in her own life when she gives speeches to women about professional success. She begrudgingly admits, "I'd been part, albeit unwittingly, of making millions of women feel that they are to blame if they cannot manage to rise up the ladder as fast as men and also have a family and an active home life (and be thin and beautiful to boot)". It is very difficult for women to find a balance between their professional lives and commitments to their family when they are expected to do everything.

On the other hand, men are not held to the same unattainable standards as women. They are not met with the same societal guilt when they cannot climb the professional ladder and be involved in their home life at the same time. Women continue to try and balance a career and childcare in ways men are never expected to do. Newly elected senator of Massachusetts, Elizabeth Warren, notes on this experience, "I learned to do everything else with a baby on my hip", describing the way in which she dealt with the challenges of being a working mother (Slaughter). She learned to function in a high-level career as a mother. Additionally, men do not face the trade-offs associated with having a child in the beginning part of the career or later on in

life. Women today are wrestling with sequencing childcare into their professional careers paths successfully.

Rigid definitions of roles in household also contribute to the inequality of childcare responsibilities in a heterosexual marriage. These definitions arise out of a gender ideology that has been transmitted through cultural practices and expectations and is expressed in both physical and emotional ways. In accordance with practices in a traditional gender ideology, a husband who is supportive of his wife's professional life and helps out around the house is a rarity. Husbands and fathers who fall below this expectation are considered normal. This behavior is reflected in the lives of Nancy and Evan Holt, from Hochschild's book, *The Second Shift*. Evan ascribes to this cultural notion that men should not contribute in the domestic sphere as much as their female counterparts. He does not participate in tasks he sees to be reserved for his wife, such as cleaning, setting the table, and taking care of their son (Hochschild 39). In Evan's perspective, any deviation outside this norm upsets balance of power he feels to be culturally appropriate. The behavior passed down from Evan's father to Evan is a model that husbands and fathers subconsciously imitate in their own lives. Even when men do participate in activities associated with childcare, they tend to be the more leisurely and enjoyable activities compared to routine tasks which women usually complete (Craig and Mullan 838). This cultural practice is duplicated and rooted deep in what culture sees as appropriate and fair even though it results in inequality.

Although men's behavior contributes to this norm, women also participate in continuing this inequality by being reluctant when they surrender childcare and domestic tasks to their husbands. Although they may want equality, it is very difficult for them to ignore the cultural expectations that have been developed over time. The societal expectation is for women to enjoy

child care and domestic activities. Women assume if they do not like these tasks they are falling short as a mother and care-giver. In Hochschild's book, she describes Nancy's attachment to her son, Joey. This attachment is very strong and Joey spends most of his time with her. He cannot sleep without her and is angered when it is his father who picks him up from school, not his mother (Hochschild 43). Nancy has a difficult time physically allowing Joey to be Evan's responsibility, as depicted in her struggle with Evan having alone time with Joey at the zoo outing.

Women often attempt to reconcile their own beliefs with the traditional gender ideology. For instance, Nancy Holt convinced herself the unequal arrangement between her and her husband correlated with her beliefs on marriage equality. She developed coping mechanisms to dissipate her internal conflict by rezoning the house and accepting all housework fell under her shift (Hochschild 51). Women in similar situations respond in the same manner by reframing their beliefs to fit the societal mold. This behavior has been documented by many researches in Tara Parker-Pope's article, "Do Women like Childcare More than Men?" The study from the article concludes that women report considerably higher levels of enjoyment than men in carrying out childcare tasks. The study's lead author, Steven Rhoads states, "...some women may have inflated their enjoyment scores because of feelings of guilt or cultural pressure" (Parker-Pope). Women rationalize the inequality in their lives because it seems easier than addressing the underlying gender inequality. Other women intentionally prevent their husbands from doing more with their children due to the responsibility they feel towards their children (Craig and Mullan 826). Even women with the resources to delegate childcare often decline to do so because societal pressures which expect them to participate in childcare are too strong. It is

necessary that women's feelings towards childcare evolve to reflect their commitment to equality.

To address the problem of unequal distribution of childcare in household, all tasks associated with childcare and the domestic sphere should be shared and diversified. Tasks can be equally distributed based on the time required for each task and the routine nature of the task. As a society, we need to develop new ways to define success that is not only based on material and economic standards. All societal standards and expectations which we hold women to should also be applied to their husbands, as both are equally responsible for raising their children. We should also give parenthood more value in the professional world by improving family/parental leave mechanisms and policies to give new value to the time women and men take away from their professional lives and put into their family. Ensuring gender equality in childcare is a start to transforming the current gender ideology to help improve other aspects of life for women.

Works Cited

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