

The real worth of `women's work'

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Arranging for repairs of the home air conditioner, consoling a distraught relative and co-ordinating play dates for your children hardly seem like things to help one climb the corporate ladder.

But a study from a University of Toronto sociologist suggests they — and a host of other household chores done predominantly by women — are a lot more valuable than society, and even those performing them, believe.

As a result, when it comes to so-called lifelong learning — the skills we develop from infancy to old age — unpaid household work can offer people numerous marketable credentials, including the capacity to adapt to change, navigate crises and manage a group of people.

"Those who do unpaid housework are covered with a cloak of invisibility," professor Margrit Eichler writes in a research paper, released at a conference at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the U of T.

Lifting that cloak not only has implications for what we identify as work and consider worthwhile skills in society but also, according to the study, raises public policy issues such as whether there should be pensions and holidays for those who look after those who cannot look after themselves.

It could also become a strong argument for the advancement of more women into managerial positions.

While it's nothing new that work around the house is under-appreciated, Eichler has used a series of questionnaires, interviews and focus groups with women, men and immigrants to assess what they do. Though quick to identify the typical physical tasks such as doing the dishes, cooking, cleaning and child care, they were for the most part unaware of the mental, emotional and spiritual work they were doing.

Once other things such as giving advice to someone, organizing driving to kids' soccer and hockey games or maintaining contact with family and friends are factored in, what constitutes "household work" dramatically increases.

Eichler's definition includes "the sum of all physical, mental, emotional and spiritual tasks that are performed for one's own or someone else's household and that maintain the daily life of those one has responsibility for."

No wonder a woman's work is never done. Statistics Canada found in the 2001 census that while more men are helping out with cleaning the house and raising the children than a generation ago, the bulk of it still falls on women's shoulders. When it comes to

caring for seniors, the gender gap is narrower but still more likely to be done by the female.

And women are also much more likely than men to stay home and raise children. "It's an incredibly fast-paced lifestyle," said Marg Ptolemy, 35, a stay-at-home mother with two children, Katie, 4, and Jackson, who will turn 2 in September.

Ptolemy, who has a master's degree in community health and was working at a bank before her daughter was born, chose to stay home. She said one of the most applicable skills she will take back to the workplace is her ability to prioritize what's going on in her family's day-to-day life.

"When you've got a thousand things coming at you, you have to learn very quickly how to identify what's important and what can wait," she said.

Eichler's study — *Lifting the Cloaks of Invisibility From Lifelong Learning Through Unpaid Household Work* — was part of a two-day conference on rethinking work and learning in a knowledge-based economy.

The gathering, which wrapped up yesterday, featured researchers discussing how workplaces and society can better identify and give value to so-called "invisible" and informal skills people acquire throughout their lives.

"So much of the focus in society is on paid work," Eichler said in an interview. "The reality, however, is that if the unpaid work wasn't being done societies wouldn't be able to survive."

The study said in recent years there's even more to do. Cuts in public services have meant increased unpaid household work, especially in terms of caring for patients being discharged sooner. That has required people to learn skills previously restricted to health care professionals, such as nurses.

Researchers also noted that because more young people are living with their parents than they were 20 years ago — 41 per cent up to the age of 29 — parents and their adult children have had to learn how to interact in the same household.

Immigrants also often have their own particular skill requirements. They must learn simple day-to-day skills such as where to shop, how to dress for cold weather and access public services, the study says.

It also notes that nannies sometimes come here but leave children and spouses back home, "leading to transnational families which require enormous skills to maintain." The report said that while unpaid housework may seem separate from the overall economy, it is intertwined. If the tasks around home are not taken care of, everything else falls apart.

"Household work and paid work are mutually interdependent," it said. "Whatever affects paid work has consequences in household work and vice versa."

But Eichler also sounds a cautionary note about the development of skills in unpaid housework. "We can't assume that everyone who's doing it is doing it well," she said. "And it's also important to remember that people can also unlearn skills and others may simply choose or not be able to learn.

"We just have to make sure that we at least acknowledge those skills are out there."