

# DRAFT

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### WHAT IS HOUSEWORK?

by

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#### **Introduction**

Housework is the stuff of which our lives are made, and as such affects all of us intimately. Sociology has spent a considerable amount of time studying this phenomenon. However, there are two sets of assumptions which underlie the vast majority of empirical studies which are highly problematic. They are:

1. Housework happens solely within households, not across households.
2. Housework consists of a set of specific tasks that require relatively low skill, that are repetitive in nature, and that are not regarded highly by society.

In this paper, we will first demonstrate that these assumptions are, in fact, widespread, and then critically examine them by drawing on an empirical study which set out to test these assumptions. A third assumption which is commonly made, that housework does not change in society over time and over the life course for individuals will be examined in a separate paper.

#### **Current Approaches to Housework**

We will examine each of the implicit assumptions in turn.

##### ***Assumption 1:***

***Housework happens solely within households, not across households.***

In order to test whether this assumption was, in fact, made we conducted various computer searches for studies on housework. Selection criteria were: the study had to have been published in 1990 or later, in English, and it had to have an empirical component. It needed to present itself as a study on housework in general, rather than on some specific aspect (e.g. food preparation, emotion work). The paper needed to identify the various housework activities in some form, rather than use a global concept of “housework”, “domestic labour”, “childcare”, etc. Review articles, and strictly theoretical discussions are therefore excluded.

We then applied two questions to each article: First, who was asked about housework? The answer to this is indicated by a checkmark. If the checkmark is under the heterosexual couple column, it means that couples were interviewed, rather than individual men or women who might be married and who might be asked about their partner's housework, but where the partner was not asked. Second, we looked at who was the focus of the study – was the focus on what the respective contributions of husbands and wives was? Or of the children? Did it include help – paid or unpaid – that was received from someone outside the household?

The results are summarized in table 1.

--- Table 1 about here ---

As table 1 indicates, outside help – whether paid or unpaid - is almost never taken into account. The focus of the vast majority of studies is either on the relative contributions of husbands and wives (husbands contribute a lot less to housework), or on the amount of time spent by women and men (rather than matched sets of spouses) on housework, and rarely on the amount of housework performed by children. As the last two columns indicate, paid help with housework is mentioned in passing in one study, and unpaid help by others outside of the household is taken into account in only two studies out of 53.

Yet presence or absence of outside help, such as a paid cleaning woman or a relative or friend who comes and helps regularly can make a tremendous amount of difference in the overall amount and type of work that needs to be performed, potentially altering our conclusions about the division of labour among couples. For instance, one would assume that it is a lot easier to have a more equitable division of labour among spouses when there is a cleaning woman who does some of the less attractive parts of the work, then when there is none.

As table 1 also indicates, there is a fascination with the division of labour between spouses. Forty out of 53 recent studies dealt with the division of labour among couples as the sole or a major focus. By contrast, we found no study that looked specifically at housework performed by single women or men who are not parents, or a comparison of the household labour performed by middle-aged and old people, or the work performed by people with and without disabilities. While there are a fair number of studies looking at ethnic and racial differences, the focus remains firmly on the couple.

***Assumption 2:***

***Housework consists of a set of specific tasks that require relatively low skill, that are repetitive in nature, and that are not regarded highly by society.***

In order to assess whether assumption 2 is in fact made, we looked at the same set of studies in terms of what activities were used to operationalize housework.

--- table 2 about here ---

The table in no way reflects the complexity of the study designs, the multiple questions that were posed, and the comparisons that were made, but it does adequately reflect what is very rarely included as relevant tasks. Repetitive tasks that require low levels of skills such as doing the dishes, shopping, preparing meals, doing the laundry etc. are almost always included in the lists of tasks investigated, while higher level functions such as planning, organizing, etc. are much more rarely included, although we were pleased to see that there were instances in which they were included. Several of the studies cited employed a secondary analysis of national data and therefore did not choose the categories of work, or they picked items that were comparable to those used in other studies. The authors in some cases were therefore quite aware of the limitations of the activities included. This does not diminish the force of the argument: Because of the prevailing operationalization of housework into tasks that require lower level rather than higher level skills, they could not include those higher level functions.

The image that emerges, then, is that housework consists of a set of repetitive tasks that require little organizational or intellectual skills. The focus tends to be on housekeeping tasks, rather than on emotion work, organizational and planning activities, crisis management, and other functions that require complex mental and social skills.

We will now critically examine these assumptions. In order to do so, we will draw on the data of our study on unpaid housework and lifelong learning.

## **The Study**

The project on Unpaid Housework and Lifelong Learning is part of a large-scale study on Work and Lifelong Learning (WALL). (See <http://wall.oise.utoronto.ca/> for a description of the complete project.) The housework study consists of four phases. At the time of writing this we have completed the data collection for phases 1 and 2. The first phase involved sending questionnaires to members of various women's groups, asking about the nature of their unpaid housework and community work and the learning attached to it. The second phase involved holding 11 focus groups that follow up on some of the findings of the questionnaires. (For more details on the study, see Eichler, forthcoming and Eichler and Matthews, 2004) Focus group members who were not part of phase 1 all completed the questionnaires. We had a total of 303 questionnaires returned.

We held 11 focus groups in 3 cities. Groups ranged in size from 4 participants to 9. The ages of participants ranged from 23 to 84 years. Four groups consisted of white women only, of these one consisted of a group of women with disabilities, a second group of women with and without disabilities consisted of women of colour. Two groups were composed were held with black women only, one with Aboriginal women, one with Chinese women, and two groups with men, all of whom were white with the exception of one Chinese male.

Overall, 52% had children at home, 48% did not, 14% were never married, 62% currently married or partnered, 21% separated or divorced, and 3% widowed. Fifty percent had a personal income below \$20,000 (11% a household income below \$20,000) and 5% a personal income (11% a household income) of over \$100,001. Finally, 35% did not work for pay, 22% worked part-time for pay, and 31% worked full-time for pay and 12% were full-time students. In terms

of education, our participants were disproportionately well educated: only 8% had high school or less, and 30% had a graduate degree. In this paper, we will draw both on the questionnaire data and the focus groups data.

In our questionnaire, we asked open-ended questions about the housework and care work people performed. The intent was not to find out what people did, but what they said they did. Would they restrict themselves to the lists of activities usually employed by sociologists? Would they also list some of the cognitive, administrative, emotional and management functions? We then followed up on this question in the focus groups.

### **Why deal with housework and care work together?**

Counter to other studies on housework, we consistently asked about housework and care work. We owe the questions on care work to our community partner – MAW (Mothers are Women – a feminist group specializing in issues of unpaid housework).<sup>1</sup> They insisted that we ask separate questions re care work, because, they argued, otherwise we would obtain only a very incomplete picture of the unpaid work done in the home. Although some respondents found it hard to make the distinction, there is no doubt that asking this question increased the depth of information considerably.

Some people did provide sharply different answers, some, however, included care work under housework and simply referred us back to the housework question when they came to the care work question. Given the overlap between the two types of work, we eventually coded everything that is simply listed by the respondent as being done as housework, and anything they list as being done for somebody else as care work – including housekeeping chores.

As we can see from table 2, a significant portion of the studies include childcare in the definition of housework. At least one aspect of care work is therefore commonly included under the rubric of housework. Kitterod (2002, p. 128?). also notes that “Much housework embodies certain aspects of care”, and that because they tend to be intertwined, it is difficult to separate them.

### **Housework/care work is performed across households**

We asked people on the questionnaire what unpaid housework<sup>2</sup> and care work<sup>3</sup> they performed for other people, and who had helped them with this<sup>4</sup>. We can thus assess who provided help for people outside their own household, and who received help – paid and unpaid – from outside their own household. 59% of the women said that they performed some unpaid housework for someone outside of their own household, 49% said they received such unpaid out-of-household

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<sup>1</sup> Kathryn Spracklin represents MAW on our project.

<sup>2</sup> “Think about what unpaid housework you have done during the last seven days. Please list all activities; include everything that you consider household work. “This was followed up with “Thinking about the past year, what other unpaid household work did you engage in that you did not do last week? Consider all seasons of the year.”

<sup>3</sup> The questions for care work were parallel.

<sup>4</sup> “Thinking about your household, in the last seven days, did anyone else do household work?” with parallel questions for one year and for care work. People identified *who* did work, *what* they did, and whether they were paid or not.

help, and 48% received some form of paid help with their household work. Putting these various activities together, 76% either received and/or provided unpaid help with housework, and if we add paid help into the equation, a total of 86% of the women indicated that there was some exchange of housework across households on either a paid or unpaid basis.

It is clear that rendering and receiving unpaid work is significant across households in this group. People who provided unpaid help were close and more distant relatives, but also neighbours, friends, co-workers, and others. Since our data are not representative of any particular population, we cannot generalize these findings, but they do suggest that cross-household exchange of unpaid labour may be significant and that restricting studies to only within household labour may severely limit our understanding of the type and amount of unpaid work that is actually performed.

In addition, many households also utilize paid help. It was interesting to note the type of help listed: from house and window cleaning over dry cleaning to snow shoveling, pet sitting, furniture repair, lawn care, babysitting, counseling, coaching, and much more. The list of paid services is thus much larger than eating out (Cohen 1998) or hiring a cleaning woman or nanny – and clearly it affects both the amount and type of work that is performed by household members themselves. While we cannot deduce from our study how widespread use of paid services is in general, a Dutch study found that 12% of Dutch households had paid domestic help, which varied by earning type: 25% of dual-earner households had domestic help compare to 6% of single-earner households (van der Lippe, Tijdens and Ruijter, 2004: 226).

### **Housework involves higher level functions**

When we asked respondents in the questionnaire about what housework they usually performed some people provided brief and general answers, others provided great detail. Here are two examples of the latter. The first person wrote in response to the question what housework she had done in the last seven days, the second person in response to the care work she had done.

1. Made three meals a day for husband and myself. Three times, daughters & grandchildren dropped in for lunch or supper – approximately 10 extra meals made. Sister-in-law and her daughter stopped by, stayed for lunch one day.
2. Made two beds daily, changed beds once in the seven days.
3. Picked up, straightened, dusted when necessary 8 roomed house daily
4. Cleaned thoroughly – dusting, vacuuming, changing beds once a week.
5. Washed, dried and folded three loads of laundry
6. Cleaned out two closets to allow room for emergency and smaller oxygen tanks – husband starting to use oxygen
7. Swept kitchen floor once a day, sometimes several times – when grandchildren come over, bringing dogs, to visit.
8. Scrubbed kitchen floor thoroughly twice.
9. Scrubbed three bathrooms every second or third day.
10. Baked three pies, a cake, five banana loaves, three apple cranberry nut loaves.
11. Shoveled 5-10cms snow from sidewalks and double driveway.
12. Readied some raised garden beds for seedling within 20 x 20 ft greenhouse – dug up by hand, adding compost, peat moss, etc.
13. Seeded trays of flowers, tomatoes; transplanted pansies, impatiens and ageratum that I've grown from seed under four banks of grow-lites in basement. Water and care for baby plants – about an hour or two a day.

14. Sorting, filing in receipts, forms, and the like in preparation for helping husband to complete income tax returns

While unusually detailed, the activities are those which would be included in most sociological studies of housework. By contrast, the next response lists a number of higher level functions:

1. research and planning family special events
  2. maintaining finances
  3. designing and implementing behavior programs – children
  4. attending school trips, teacher meetings
  5. arranging for and attending health appointments
  6. keeping track of all paper work + information
  7. planning, purchasing, repair and distribution of clothes
  8. planning, purchasing repair of family's recreational equipment
  9. all driving to events
  10. monitoring and assistance with homework
  11. researching, discussions and decision making around education and career path
  12. corresponding and gifting with friends and family
  13. chronicling family information and stories
  14. physically assisting with others' life tasks (mother, disabled friend)
  15. car maintenance
  16. care of household plants
  17. education & emotion support for family
- list is still incomplete

Overall, however, most respondents were more likely to list lower-level functions than higher level functions, as can be seen from table 3.

--- Table 3 about here ---

Indeed, the tasks that are mentioned most frequently do not look very different from those included in table 2. In other words, if sociologists focus on these tasks, so do the people who engage in doing housework (the figures in table 3 are based on both female and male respondents). We had anticipated this result, and had therefore planned to follow up on this issue in our focus groups. In the focus groups, we started out with the same question – what housework and care work do you normally do? We obtained similar sets of tasks, plus a number of higher level functions. We then asked:

Did you do any of the following tasks?

- provide emotional support to someone (comfort, console, counsel, give advice, listen to)
- organise, plan, manage or arrange matters (e.g. family events or schedules, arrange repair people, tutors, play dates for children)
- deal with crises
- maintain contact with family members or friends through telephoning, writing letters or visiting
- take care of yourself
- resolve conflicts

In each of the very diverse groups we found that all of the above tasks were performed by most if not all of the participants. We will here bracket the question of self care (see Eichler and Matthews, 2004) and briefly consider the form the other tasks take. In only one group – the Aboriginal women’s group – were all of the above functions spontaneously mentioned. In all other groups people acted with both surprise and recognition indicating that yes, indeed, they did all of these things.

*(a) Provision of emotional support*

Emotion work takes place both in paid and unpaid work, and definitely within families. It is a highly gendered type of work (Hochschild 1989; Hochschild 1983; Wharton and Erickson 1995). We were therefore not surprised to find that all of our women – but not all of the men – indicated that they provided emotional support for someone.

A repeated refrain from the women was that they were the ones who were carrying the emotional burden in their families, and that their husbands were either incapable or unwilling to share the load. “I was always the one who was providing emotional support”, was a sentiment that was expressed a lot. One native woman stated simply that her husband “doesn’t know how to go through the emotions. He doesn’t know what it is.”

Looking at the men, although most of them stated that they provided emotional support to their wives, occasionally to others, their examples were much less specific, and some indicated that their wives did more of it. For instance, Ben said:

I do a lot of that stuff really well at work, but I don’t do it at home. (laughter) Um - I’m not a good emotional support. I provide a little bit. ... we’ve got a 19 year old who can be a challenge sometimes. I certainly don’t provide much emotional support around that.

Emotion work proved to be a major burden for some – but not all – of the women. One First Nations’ woman recounted some of the emotional support work she has rendered. “...so much of that work is emotional work ... like my brother had schizophrenia. And nobody in the family would even accept the fact that he has a mental illness, let alone deal with it.” So her brother came and lived with her for 6 months right out of the mental hospital. She also had a 13-year old foster son, her ex-husband’s step-grandson, and in addition, when her best friend had to move away, he asked her to look after his daughter, who “was troubled” – it turned out that she also had schizophrenia. “And I was coming to work here. And that was when it was me and Felicia running this whole big thing at work.”

Providing emotional support came with a high cost for some of the women. They talked about burning out and needing to delegate some of this work to others, of feeling drained after trying to settle a conflict between relatives. One woman described how her very frequent telephone calls with her daughter left her exhausted. “I was almost shaking sometimes when I hung up.” However, there was no way she was going to abandon her child, in spite of the costs to herself.

On the other hand, some enjoyed providing emotional support. As Annabelle stated: “...I enjoy providing emotional support. I find it satisfying, especially if you can see some kind of progress

being made. Like, the light bulb goes on with your child, or you've made a connection where they suddenly understand why something had to be done the way." Although she found the work hard, she found it satisfying.

Some women were part of support networks in which support is both rendered and received. Loretta, a young black woman, said:

I'm a single parent, and most of my friends are single parents and we have problems with our children in school, and we always have to call each other and talk to each other about, you know, when the principal calls, or for example, like my friend had problems with her son last week, and he didn't come home. So at 11 o'clock in the night I was on the phone with her, talking to her, reassuring her that he hasn't run away, and she wanted to know should she call the cops, and I said no ...it's the support that we have to give each other. But, he just went to the movies. So I am like a counselor to my friends.

A particular challenge that many of our respondents faced was to provide emotional support long-distance. A woman from Iran, for instance, told us "My sister in the US is having a baby. My mother lives in Turkey and she could not get a visa. I phone my sister every day."

Even women who were living by themselves provided emotional support for someone. A woman in her 80s, blind, and receiving care, told us how she listened to her care taker's troubles, and that she tried to introduce her care taker's children to appreciate music.

Emotion work, then, plays a big role in the daily lives of the women who participated in the focus groups. Some find it draining, some find it enjoyable, some face horrific situations, others mention specific instances, such as a partner who is "not having a good day", a grandmother who needs to be visited in hospital, friends who are going through a separation or divorce, children who are having problems in school. The women all engage in this type of work, albeit in many different ways.

#### ***(b) Maintaining contact with kin and friends***

Universally, families include kin. Kinship is partially based on blood ties and marriage, but there is always a social component as well – some relatives may not be acknowledged as kin (Stack 1997) while some friends are given fictive kin names – uncle or auntie. With high rates of divorce and union separation, and consequent high rates of step families (whether married or common law), the distinction grows even more blurred. Kinship ties become activated in cases where people like each other, and remain dormant – or may be repudiated - when this is not the case. Rubin (1985: 22) noted 20 years ago that "for most of us", friendship "is experienced as a conditional relationship, kinship as an unconditional one." In step families, as well as in other families, some kin relations have also become conditional. We thus decided to inquire about kin-keeping and friend-keeping together.

One kin relationship remains central: that between mothers and their children. A fair amount of discussion centered around this relationship. Others have a voluntary component. As Winona, an aboriginal woman, notes: "... on their father's side, we don't have any contact at all. We've

tried to make our contacts with them, but they don't follow through, so it's kind of like we've drifted away from the reserve type of contacts, and stuck to ourselves."

All of our focus group participants maintain contact with kin and friends – some locally, many long-distance. Regardless of location, these relationships may be sources of support, comfort, and joy as well as stress, guilt, and problems. In either case, they consume a fair amount of energy.

One young black woman recounted that her sister was getting married and about to move away. She had been more closely connected with their mother. The mother was now trying to increase the contact with the respondent, offering babysitting services, and asking for other services in return. "She wasn't like that before. So I feel just because my sister's leaving, she's trying to make me feel guilty into doing stuff for her because she won't have my sister there all the time to take her around anymore."

This story generated a more general discussion when someone else in the group asked: "Has anyone ever refused to do what was expected of them? Like what you're saying, your mom wants to blackmail you into doing things (laughter)?" The consensus was that it is very difficult to do this.

Maintenance of long distance relationships is fraught with special problems. Weekly phone calls to China or Kenya, for example, are expensive. Cultural differences develop that are hard to bridge. As one woman from Africa said "I get too Westernized for them ...it's a problem." There are technical problems in connecting with remote places. Finding out what is going on long-distance is not easy. E-mail is used by some but is not an option for others, telephone connections are sometimes bad.

Some of the black women had a special problem in that their relatives in Africa or the Caribbean expected them to help them financially. This was difficult – many of them were sole support mothers and financially strapped themselves. All of the women and most of the men were involved in maintaining complicated kin and friendship relationships.

### ***(c) Conflict Resolution***

A number of the participants (both women and men) said that they had resolved conflicts between family members. Some mentioned their own children who were fighting over such issues as access to the family's computer, or whose turn it was to do the dishes. Some were involved in very serious conflicts among their kin, such as inheritance fights. One native woman who had to deal with an inheritance battle described herself as "the ear" in her family – all of her father's sister (the heirs) confided in her, and she was careful not to break the confidence, but to try to make peace among them.

A young white mother told about another inheritance battle where she is caught in the middle. The conflict is between her mother and her uncle, and since the speaker's children are also listed in the will, it is an emotionally tense situation with legal implications.

I feel like I'm sandwiched between that ... family, and then my portion of that family. And then, I also have my step-family, and my stepmother passed away with cancer, and so, we're going through a lot of things, too, in trying to connect the family and create memories and traditions with anniversary get-togethers and things like that.

This quote graphically illustrates what sometimes makes family conflicts so particularly difficult to deal with. It is often not possible to isolate the conflict, and conflicts need to be dealt with while maintaining positive kinship ties.

When we probed in the men's group whether they were involved in resolving conflicts within their families, one of the men said: "Well, my wife is good at that. There's some conflicts sometimes between myself and her family sometimes, so she's good at that." However, another man, Paul, reported that he had resolved a conflict between his brother and the rest of the family, and brought him back into the fold. Ben mentioned when there is conflict involving his wife's part of the family, she will deal with it, and if it involves his part, he will.

In every group there were some people who gave specific examples of recent instances in which they had resolved conflicts. All but one found conflict resolution difficult – consuming a lot of energy, time and sometimes money, finding it uncomfortable, unpleasant, being caught in the middle, having to hang on to one's own temper if it involved their own children, trying to find creative solutions that would eliminate the source of conflict.

The sole exception was an old white woman who sees herself as the bridge between people who have conflicts. She enjoys being diplomatic, and makes an explicit connection between applying this skill within her own family as well as in organizations within which she is active.

I find that I act as the referee in family squabbles. In this one, my son is not talking to his sister, and I'm the one who calls each one up and says look, you're the mature person, you have to give a little. And then you phone the sister and you say, you know look, he's so neurotic, you have to be the one - and I get them together, and I – I get on with everybody. And I find it's being the diplomat, the hub of the wheel, it's very rewarding. Because whenever people have a problem, then they know they can come to me and I like that. And I enjoy intervening in the organizations I'm in. When people don't get along, I find that I'm often the one with the bridge to um, bring people together.

This was one of the instances where someone within the group drew the explicit parallel between skills that are useful within the home with skills that are useful in volunteer work or paid work.

#### ***(d) Crisis Management***

Crises abounded in all of the women's groups, less so in the two men's groups. The three most frequently cited types of crises revolved around finances, health issues and children. The problems could be experienced by the speaker or someone close to her, and sometimes it became a vicious circle: because someone had a money problem, the stress level was very high, which resulted in a health impairment.

Health crises included a mother-in-law back in China who had a stroke. The woman had to arrange help by telephone. Others involved children with seizures in the school yard, a severe bout of some illness experienced by the speaker, for instance fibromyalgia which made it impossible for Lila to use her right hand – she could not even put on a bra by herself. The aboriginal woman with the schizophrenic brother quoted above talked about it as “a traumatic experience”.

Given that we had a good representation of low income women, not surprisingly financial issues loomed large. For some of the immigrants this situation was compounded by being expected to solve their relatives’ financial problems in their home land. Some of the women from Africa were asked to help out financially with their relatives both here and in Africa, when they themselves were finding it extremely difficult to make ends meet. Nor is it easy to get the money to the people in need. Rose checks whenever someone is going to Kenya so see whether she can send money with them, or tries to find someone whose child goes to school here in Canada, so that she can give money to the child and the parent gives the money to the person in need in Kenya. It requires extremely careful budgeting on her part. “I have to make sure that I leave some money aside to take care of any people who might not have enough food and that kind of thing.” It is a constant juggling act for her.

Some of the crises are therefore recurrent, some are unique. Rose budgets not just for her own crises, but also for other people’s crises. Others talked about preparing in a similar vein for crises that might befall them. Priscilla, for instance, coped with the constant financial pressure by engaging in very careful long-term financial planning. As a student, she has to pay school fees in cycles of four months. “So I always have to think like 2 years ahead, (laughs) kind of thing, about what I’m going to do and what to do for summer work... And then if I don’t go to school, my loan payments will start kicking in, and then having to manage all of that.”

When the health gives out in such a stressful situation, it presents a double problem. Priscilla, who has experienced this, prepares for it by buying things when they available for sale. This smoothes things over during particularly rough spots, “like if I don’t have money at least I have stuff that I bought that was on sale already.”

Another woman who had been very comfortably off while still living in Bermuda, traveling first class, taking frequent vacations, now has to budget extremely carefully.

And part of that ... bit of crisis management that also comes into organizing and planning, is that I’ve decided that in addition to being a full time student and a part time faculty member at a college, that I’d also have these various and sundry business ventures, that I try to do ... to do to ensure that there’s money coming in.

Yet other crises that had to be managed were of a legal nature. The partner of one of the women was applying for custody of his son, of whom he has interim custody. Jessica observes “just having to prepare yourself to walk into that court room and be judged by someone who doesn’t come from your experience, may not – will discriminate against my partner because he’s a man - that’s a big crisis for me.”

Children, their own or other peoples, generate various types of crises. Vera helps other parents when children are going to be suspended from school, or helps arrange homework so that the child is not missing 7 days of school. Dealing with her own teenage children presents recurring crises for Pamela. They don't want to talk with her, sequester themselves in their room, so she gets confused. "Not sure what to say sometimes, and I don't want to be their enemy."

Berta recounts that her youngest son, in grade 12, did not tell her that he needed money to apply for registration at universities. She did not know this until the deadline was up. As a single mother, who had so many of her own crises to deal with, this presented a major problem.

The men, interestingly, did not mention many crises. Some mentioned technical problems such as frozen pipes, or a broken phone line at his in-laws (which required a phone call to get it fixed), or a child asking for money. As a group, they were better off financially, which removed one important source of problems. In the women's lives, however, crises occurred from time to time.

### *(e) Planning, Managing and Organizational Work*

As is obvious from the above, dealing with emotional issues, maintaining kin and friend relationships, handling crises and resolving conflicts often require extraordinarily careful planning and organization. This, certainly, is a set of skills that is highly useful in just about any work place (as is the capacity to deal with the other issues!), however, rarely is it recognized that running a complicated household both requires such skills and may hone them to a fine edge. When we asked specifically for examples of planning and organizational work, we heard of many examples. Special occasions such as Christmas, weddings and birthdays, etc. require special planning, but daily routines always not only need to be managed but prepared and planned for.

"Responsibility for the household involves performing work that is largely mental ..." (Hessing 1994: 613). This is true on a daily basis. The women told us how planning is a constant part of their lives.

My organizing, planning, I do that everyday. ... there's not a point where it stops and starts. Like in the morning, you have to make sure the kids are up and they're dressed and fed and they brush their teeth, and you get them on the bus. I run to work, you get home, and all day, right now, I'm thinking, what are we going to have for supper.

Women with temporary or permanent disabilities, whose energy is often limited because of their disability, must plan particularly carefully, just as women with severely limited financial budgets must consider every cent that is spent. Here is the ingenious solution one black woman came up with when she was temporarily disabled, and how it changed the way she organized part of her housework permanently.

There was one time ... that I tore 2 ligaments in my foot. So anyway, I was not moving for a couple of weeks. I was almost bedridden. At that time, I think I had to plan and organize my family around who does what. Now the first challenge was the groceries, because they were not used to doing it. So what I did was, I ... prepared a master list of

everything that can be bought for the house, including toothpicks. (laughter) And so I had that master list on my computer. And then what they did is every Saturday, they printed that list and went around the house. And I then I had a rule, if something is less than half, then you tick it and bring it so that we don't run out. Then I also put the quantities of how much I buy and how much they cost and that kind of thing. So I had this four page list, everything that can be bought, including nail polish. Everything. So that's when I realized, after that, that I don't even have to do groceries myself. I can tell the kids, pick up the list, and they go around the house and they tick what we need, and they also added their own things, what they think they would like to have. ... and then they just go and pick it up. So I found that very, very useful.

Mothers routinely arrange childcare for their children. For instance Ping, one of the Chinese women, and her husband come home from work after their son arrives home from school. She arranged that between her, her husband and her neighbours, they share picking up the children of both families on alternate days.

Some of the women reflected that the managing they did at home enabled them to do the same in their paid work to great effect. They suggested that their male coworkers are less capable to plan and organize something effectively, and attribute it to the fact that their mothers and wives probably do it for them at home. After the big decision has been made, it is the women at the workplace who deal with "all the details in organizing, planning and managing". Upon the question whether they were able to do this because of the work they did at home, they confirmed, yes, "because we automatically know what's missing, ok this didn't get done, that didn't get done."

One of the men made the opposite point – he transferred skills gained at work to help in planning special events at home. He said "I do have from my job some experience organizing...so I have some experience from that, so I do sometimes jump in and help with that [organizing a birthday party for his daughter]." Upon the question "What sort of things would you jump in?" he replied:

Well, I might say ok, well if you're having a party, how many people can you invite that will fit into the room. Do we need chairs for this, when do we do cleaning, what needs to be cleaned ... – make a list of what you need to buy. So I can do that sort of thing.

All the men said that they organized, managed and arranged things, but for none of them did this have the all inclusive nature that it had for the women. Men mentioned planning events for their buddies, and discussing what needed to be done with respect to repair and maintenance of the home and car with their wives, or organizing the family finances. Some mentioned that they organized getting the groceries or the laundry, or planning a trip, but none reported that they planned the daily routines for their families. One of them informed us that "recently ... my wife and I agreed that she would do all the managing now and I would just kind of show up when, whenever I was supposed to." In other words, while none of the women had the option not to plan, at least some of the men did.

Just as the planning skills acquired in the home may spill over into paid work, so they may also spill over into unpaid community work. In a substantial number of cases, the work women do for

their children involves organizing for others at the same time. For example, one mother organizes social events for her children in a way that involves the Kenyan community and the community at large. Another organizes parties for Nigerians in Canada. Sarah organized “a little presentation at their school around our holiday. We celebrate Hanukah, so I’ll be doing that.” Others are involved a wide range of other activities, such as Sparks (part of Girl Guides), the La Leche League (for helping women breastfeed), and many mothers volunteer at their children’s schools. That was particularly obvious from the questionnaires – 84 % of the women indicated that they engaged in some unpaid community or volunteer work in the last year. In the focus groups, we did not introduce the topic of volunteer work, but it came up spontaneously in most groups.

Given their complicated, complex lives, most of the women required substantial planning and managerial skills to keep themselves and their families functioning smoothly – or as smoothly as is possible, given the various crises many had to cope with.

It is clear, then, that housework and care work involves much more than the list of mundane functions that tends to be included in sociological studies of housework. Planning and management – time management, financial management, event planning, crisis management, budgeting one’s energies carefully, arranging social activities, arranging child care and care of people with health problems are integral parts of running a household.

## **Conclusion**

Together, our survey and focus groups make it entirely clear that housework and care works is performed both within and across households. While housework does include a significant proportion of functions that are repetitive and require relatively low skill, it also includes significant aspects of higher level functions such as planning time, budgets, schedules, events, negotiating among different personalities of varying ages, sexes, and dispositions, resolving conflicts between close and sometimes distant kin, providing support, advice and encouragement, dealing with unanticipated crises, and others. Some of these latter functions are prized highly when employed within the paid work force, but they tend to be invisible when performed without pay within the household.

Empirical studies of housework that fail to capture these aspects of housework would be comparable to studies that ask researchers: how much typing do you do? Who does the filing? What portion of copying (or downloading and printing) of articles is done by yourself, and what portion by research assistants? These are constant aspects of doing research, repetitive, not highly rewarding, usually disliked (one of the examples that was spontaneously cited by our respondents as housework they disliked was filing papers), occasionally liked. Restricting our analysis to these aspects of research certainly does not convey the richness of its nature, the skills we learn by performing research, the changing nature of topics and methods, nor its importance.

It is time to move from treating housework as work that only occurs within households, not across them and that is repetitive in nature and requiring low skill to capture its real importance, variance and complexity.

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