

Housework

THE INVISIBLE LABOUR

3.1 "MY MOTHER DOES NOT WORK"

We are used to seeing women work around the house from early in the morning to late at night. They fetch and store water, clean the house and the surroundings, cook, wash everyone's clothes, take care of the children and the elderly, and attend to those who may be sick. All this back-breaking work is pulled together in what is called "housework."

Women seem "naturally" suited to housework. Others may "help" them, but housework is actually their responsibility. In our society, womanhood is defined through these activities. It is common to speak of women who are not good at these activities as un-womanly.

In fact we are shocked if all this is described as "work" because it is generally considered as an expression of women's love for the family. They are not expected to want appreciation, remuneration or even anything else in return. The more selfless and service-oriented a woman is, the better she is considered. So, even when women work outside the home and earn money for the family, they are expected to cook, take care of everyone, and also work around the house.

Read the poem in the box. Can you explain the lines: "The guilt that the speaker does not feel haunts the reply."

We all know that there are no such similar expectations of men. Girls in a family are required to help with housework, but not the boys. Men are

expected to earn for the family, but not to share the work around the house or to look after the people in the house. Of course some men and some boys do help in the house and do cook. Their numbers may be growing, but even today, that is not generally true. The message that men get from society is that they should not do housework. Men who help in the house may even be laughed at.

The teacher's question - "What does your mother do?"

The automatic answer- "Nothing, she's a housewife."

The guilt that the speaker does not feel haunts the reply.

The knowledge

That the one who wiped and polished the shoes on his feet -

Who washed and ironed the clothes on his body -

Who made the dosa he ate for breakfast -

Who packed the tiffin box in his bag -

The one who does these things every day

Does nothing . . . she is only a mother.

Source: Facebook

Points to discuss:

1. Do you think this method of dividing work is fair and just?
2. How does it make women's work around the house "invisible"?
3. Does it give women any choice? What do you think and why?
4. Do you think there will be more of a sense of sharing and joy in the house if everyone in the family works together at the household chores?

The funny thing is that men do all these activities for money. And when they work for pay, they specialize in doing only one thing. We all know Sanjeev Kapoor, the famous chef, don't we? In hotels, housekeeping is a postgraduate specialization. Male nurses, ward boys and doctors care for the elderly and sick. Washer people can be both men and women. Laundries are usually run by men. Men are tailors.

Let us think about these questions with the help of the following poem by Vimala, "Vantillu." Here, a woman tells the story of women's lives. It's the story of the poet's mother, and all "mothers' mothers." It is her story as well. History brings no change to women's lives. What was fun when children played together, turns into drudgery for the grown woman who slaves alone. We never learn the mother's name—or even the speaker's name. The mother is a ghost who haunts the poet's kitchen, her arms turned into spoons and spatulas. The poet remembers her as flaring up like a furnace sometimes. But her anger did not start any revolution. In fact, despite the lifetime that women have given to kitchens, the

names engraved, even on the vessels, are those of their husbands.

Modernity (which, political theory tells us, promises freedom to all) brings the poet a fancy kitchen with modern gadgets. But she remains, like her mother, a slave to its demands. Even though some of the details of the poem may sound specific to some families and communities (the dalit poet Challapalli Swaroopa Rani, for instance, contrasts this kitchen with the three stones that her people cook on), it highlights the nature of compulsion and drudgery in everyday cooking.

Vantillu (The Kitchen)

I remember the kitchen's
flavour upon flavour,
a mouthwatering treasury,
pungence of seasonings,
and the aroma of incense
from the prayer room
next door. Each morning
the kitchen awoke
to the swish of churning butter,
the scraping of scoured pots.
And in the centre, the stove,
fresh washed with mud, painted
and bedecked, all set to burn.

We saved secret money in the
seasoning box; hid sweets too,
and played at cooking with lentils and
jaggery.

We played Mother and Father,
in the magic world of kitchen
that wrapped childhood in its spell.

No longer playground for the grownup
girl
now trained into kitchenhood.

Like all the mothers
and mothers' mothers before her, in
the kitchen,
she becomes woman right here.
Our kitchen is a mortuary.
Pans, tins, gunny bags
crowd it like cadavers
that hang amid clouds of damp wood
smoke.
Mother floats, a ghost here,
a floating kitchen herself,
her eyes melted in tears,
her hands worn to spoons,
her arms, spatulas that turn
into long frying pans, and
other kitchen tools.
Sometimes mother glows
like a blazing furnace
and burns through the kitchen,
pacing, restless, a caged tiger,
banging pots and pans.
How easy, they say,
the flick of the ladle and the cooking's
done.
No one visits now.
No one comes to the kitchen
except to eat.

My mother was queen of the kitchen,
but the name engraved on the pots and
pans
Is Father's.

Luck, they say, landed me in my great
kitchen:
gas stove, grinder, sink, and tiles.
I make cakes and puddings,
not old-fashioned snacks as my mother
did.
But the name engraved on pots and
pans
is my husband's.

My kitchen wakes
to the whistle of the pressure cooker,
the whirl of the electric grinder.
I am a well-appointed kitchen myself,
turning round like a mechanical doll.
My kitchen is a workshop, a clattering,

busy, butcher stall, where I cook
and serve, clean, and cook again.
In dreams, my kitchen haunts me,
my artistic kitchen dreams,
the smell of seasonings even in jasmine.

Damn all kitchens. May they burn to
cinders,
the kitchens that steal our dreams,
drain
our lives, eat our days--like some
enormous vulture.
Let us destroy those kitchens
that turned us into serving spoons.
Let us remove the names engraved on
pots and pans.
Come, let us tear out these private
stoves,
before our daughters must step
solitary into these kitchens.
For our children's sakes,
let us destroy these lonely kitchens.

Translated by B V L Narayana Row

Points to discuss:

1. How do you understand the line: "she becomes woman right here"? Can you relate it to what was discussed in Unit 2 on Socialization?
2. Does the poem describe what happens in your own house also? If not, can you describe for the class what happens in your house?
3. The poet's mother sometimes flares up into a furnace. Does this happen with your mother? Why do you think this happens?
4. Is the kitchen shown in the poem always a place of drudgery? When is it not so?

Did you know?

In every country across the world, men spend less time on household work than women. If we compare different countries, in some (such as Norway and Finland) they spend more time compared to others (for example, Mexico, Turkey, India). But in India they spend the least amount of time on housework.

According to a survey done by the United Nations, Indian women spend five and a half hours each day on housework whereas men spend half an hour to forty five minutes!

Do you know the cost of the economy of care?

If the 35 crore Indian women were paid for all the work that they do in and around the household in India, it would amount to 29 trillion Indian rupees.

This is 61% of India's Gross Domestic Product!

3.2 “SHARE THE LOAD”

In this class, we will read an excerpt from a short essay by Judy Brady, an American writer, that humorously describes what it means to be a wife—to be in the service of the husband and children without expecting much in return. It shows that the roles of wife and husband are not equal and complementary. They are unequal because just by being a husband, a man has many privileges and personal services. The essay questions this male privilege in marriage and also the inequality in a husband-wife relationship. It forces us to think about new relationships that can be more equal and therefore better.

I want a wife!

I belong to that class of people known as wives. I am A Wife. And, not altogether incidentally, I am a mother.

Not too long ago a male friend of mine appeared on the scene fresh from a recent divorce. He had one child, who is, of course, with his ex-wife. He is looking for another wife. As I thought about him while I was ironing one evening, it suddenly occurred to me that I too would like to have a wife. Why do I want a wife?

I would like to join new courses (in college) which will improve my chances of promotion so that I can become economically independent, support myself, and, if need be, support those dependent upon me. I want a wife who will work, earn, and send me to these classes.

And while I am attending the classes, I want a wife to take care of my children. I want a wife to make sure my children eat properly and are kept clean. I want a wife who will wash the children's clothes and keep them

mended. I want a wife who is a good and nurturing attendant to my children, who arranges for their schooling, makes sure that they have an adequate social life with their peers, takes them to the park, the zoo, etc. I want a wife who takes care of the children when they are sick, a wife who arranges to be around when the children need special care, because, of course, I cannot miss classes. My wife must arrange to lose time at work and not lose the job. It would be good if my in-laws could join us and take care of the children while my wife is working.

I want a wife who will take care of my physical needs. I want a wife who will keep my house clean, a wife who will tidy up after my children, a wife who will tidy up after me. I want a wife who will keep my clothes clean, ironed, mended, replaced when need be, and who will see to it that my personal things are kept in their proper place so that I can find what I need the minute I need it.

I want a wife who will take care of my parents well. When they stay with us, I want a wife who will take care of their everyday needs and food preferences. I want a wife who will serve them coffee the way they want it. I want a wife who will keep the house clean, will prepare special meals, serve them to me and my family. I want a wife who takes care of all the needs of my parents so that they feel comfortable and who makes sure that they have everything. I want a wife who welcomes my friends, cooks for them and serves them. And I want a wife who knows that sometimes I need a night out by myself.

I want a wife who is sensitive to my sexual needs, a wife who makes love passionately and eagerly when I feel like it, a wife who makes sure that I

am satisfied. And, of course, I want a wife who will not demand sexual attention when I am not in the mood for it. I want a wife who assumes complete responsibility for birth control, because I do not want more children.

If, by chance, I find another person more suitable as a wife than the wife I already have, I want the liberty to replace my present wife with another one. Naturally, I will expect a fresh, new life; my wife will take the children and be solely responsible for them so that I am left free.

When I am through with my new course and have a job, I want my wife to quit working and remain at home so that my wife can more fully and completely take care of a wife's duties. My God, who wouldn't want a wife?

Points to discuss:

1. Why does Judy Brady exclaim "My God! Who wouldn't want a wife?"
2. Can you list three important aspects of being a good wife from the extract above?
3. Can you list three important aspects of being a good husband from the above extract?
4. Are your two lists above different, or the same? If they are not, why do you think they are or they are not?

Share the load

As you have seen in the earlier lesson as well as in the section above, there is an enormous amount of work that a wife and a mother do which most people generally do not consider as "work." Read, for instance, the lists of household work in the boxes that follow. Not all kinds of work may be relevant in our different contexts, but we do get a sense of the sheer volume of work that needs to get done to keep a house running smoothly. You may also have seen some recent advertisements that try to raise this issue in a thoughtful manner. Take a look, for example, at the series of advertisements for household products that Havells brought out on housework in 2014, titled "Respect for Women," on our website, or on <www.youtube.com> on your own. Similarly, see an advertisement for a washing powder titled "Is laundry only a woman's job? Share the Load." More importantly, we can see that housework, by nature, is not necessarily suited to women alone. Actually, we can see clearly that housework can be easily and equally well-handled by men, whether married or not. In fact, the Havells series of advertisements are telling us that marriage is not simply about living together but about friendship, companionship, and jointly sharing everything, including housework—we need to move ahead of earlier models of marriage where only women served their husbands and families.

Daily household chores – morning

Clean the yard/front portion and put kolam/muggu
Pick up the milk packets and newspaper
Clean the kitchen counters and mop
Clear remains from last evening's dishes and put them for wash
Cut vegetables, boil milk, prepare tea/coffee
Cook breakfast and coffee and serve
Cook lunch and pack boxes for children and adults
Cook an extra meal for the children after they return from school
Make up the beds - yours and children's
Clean the dining table, reading tables and beds of litter, pencils, papers, books and gadgets
Sort the clothes to be washed and soak them/put them in the machine
Put the trash out to be picked up
Water the plants
Clean/wash bathrooms - yours and children's

Daily household chores – evening

Help children complete homework
Drop them at the hobby class and pick them up
Prepare dinner and serve
Gather dried clothes, fold them, sort them for ironing
Plan the next day's meals and make necessary preparations (soak, cut and preserve, set curd)
Take out the washed dishes and put them away
Clean kitchen (counter)

Housework Routine-Weekly chores

Bedrooms

Strip beds & wash all bedding
Clean all surfaces & dust ornaments & pictures
Clean mirrors
Dust light shades
Vacuum clean mattress
Vacuum clean window vents
Vacuum clean skirting boards
Vacuum clean floors
Make beds with fresh clean bedding

Bathrooms

Put towels and bathmats into the wash
Clean toilet
Clean sink, bath and shower
Clean mirrors
Wipe down tiles
Vacuum clean window vents
Vacuum clean skirting boards
Vacuum clean floors
Mop floor
Put out fresh towels & bathmat

Stairs & Landings

Dust pictures & ornaments
Dust /wipe spindles & banisters
Dust light shades
Vacuum clean skirting boards
Vacuum clean floors
Vacuum clean stairs

Living Rooms – Lounge / Dining / Conservatory

Wash all cushion covers / throws
Dust all surfaces, pictures & ornaments
Dust lamps & light shades
Clean coffee & side-tables
Recycle unwanted magazines & newspapers
Vacuum clean sofa
Vacuum clean window vents
Vacuum clean underneath sofa
Vacuum clean floor & rugs

Hallway

Dust pictures & ornaments
Dust light shades
Vacuum skirting boards
Vacuum floors
Mop floors

Kitchen

Wipe down work surfaces &
cupboard/ drawer fronts
Clean kitchen windowsill
Clean hob & wipe down the oven
Empty toaster tray & clean toaster
Clean microwave inside & out
Clean bread bin inside & out
Wipe down & clean small
appliances on kitchen work tops
Scrub kitchen sink
Wipe down large appliances
Clean kitchen table & chairs
Wipe down kitchen bin
Vacuum clean light shades

Vacuum clean window vents
Vacuum clean skirting boards
Vacuum clean floor
Mop floor

Toilet

Put towels into the wash
Clean toilet
Clean sink
Dust light shades
Wipe down tiles
Vacuum clean window vents
Vacuum clean skirting boards
Vacuum clean floors
Mop floors
Put out fresh towels

Other

Check food stocks
Check household stocks
Plan menu
Write shopping lists

ASSIGNMENT

You have seen in the boxes above detailed lists of daily household and weekly tasks. These lists demonstrate the kind of pressure that housewives experience to maintain the house. Prepare similar lists of household tasks, both daily and weekly, followed in your family or that of someone you know.

Read the incident narrated in the following box. Do you think things are different for women from different socio-economic, caste, class and community backgrounds? Why?

Go to our website and read Abburi Chaya Devi's "Srimathi - Udyogini" there. Discuss with your classmates how this story compares with the stories shown in the advertisements mentioned above.

**You may become the first Indian woman CEO of Pepsico. Even then
your priority should be to buy milk for the household!**

This is about 14 years ago...And I got a call about 9.30 in the night from the existing chairman and CEO at that time. He said, Indra, we're going to announce you as president and put you on the board of directors...I got home at about 10, got into the garage, and my mother was waiting at the top of the stairs. And I said, "Mom, I've got great news for you." She said, "Let the news wait. Can you go out and get some milk?" So like a dutiful daughter, I went out and got the milk and came back...I banged it on the counter and I said, "I had great news for you. I've just been told that I'm going to be President on the Board of Directors. And all that you want me to do is to go out and get the milk, what kind of a mom are you?" And she said to me, "Let me explain something to you. You might be president of PepsiCo. You might be on the board of directors. But when you enter this house, you're a wife, you're a daughter, you're a daughter-in-law, you're a mother."

(Indra Nooyi, Chairman of Pepsico, 1st July 2014.)