

## **What's Weighing Working Women Down?**

### **Heavier Household Duties and a Higher Barrier to Entry Than Men**

Becky and her husband David wake up early to get ready for the day. Both of them have been working from home ever since the pandemic hit. Becky gets a head start on laundry as David scrolls the news feed on his phone and sips his coffee. Then, as David boots up his computer and starts reading emails, Becky wakes up their two children and helps them get ready for school. Once the kids are ready and holding the packed lunches Becky made for them, she drives them to school. When Becky returns home, she quickly dives into her work. In between client calls, she washes dishes and tidies up a bit. Once the end of the school day hits, David leaves to pick up the kids while Becky makes dinner. After dinner, David turns on the TV and relaxes for the night. However, Becky answers a few more emails and types up a report she hadn't gotten to earlier.

Nowadays, this is a fairly common way of life. Since so many people are still working from home, the division between traditional work, housework, and childcare has blurred. However, the stress of this experience is not shared equally - women have been experiencing a heavier burden and higher stress levels than men. While it is unclear if it is due to the expectations of society, their partners, or themselves, researchers have found that women working from home have been taking on a lot more housework during the workday than their male counterparts. Women who do work outside of the home experience a similar phenomenon, called the "second shift", but being at home all day where one can intersperse household chores within the workday creates a unique dynamic. Even in this modern era, many working women are still expected to take on the traditional female role on top of their careers. This has a massive impact on the work-life balance and mental state of women who work from home.

We live in an age where many occupations are capable of being done mostly or completely from home, rather than in the traditional workplace. Many women shifted to work from home during the pandemic, and many of that number have still not shifted back to in-person work. Although both men and women worked from home, they were not affected equally by the change. On average, women balanced far more domestic duties during and outside of work hours, and experienced more stress when working from home. If they also happen to be women of color, life in the workplace, both in-person and online at home, becomes even more difficult for them. Despite doing equal if not more work than their male counterparts, women's work achievements go largely under-acknowledged.

Although this wave of white-collar work from home is a new change for us, working from home is hardly a new concept. People have been working at home for centuries. Professor Eileen Boris, who has spent years studying where the line between work and home blurs together, says that the home has been a place of work for women for most of history. So, this balance between household duties, child-rearing, and for-profit work is not new to women. For example, the wives of craftsmen and tailors would often prepare materials or make things at home which would then be used or sold by their husbands. According to Professor Boris, the "line" between home and work only started to form during the Industrial Revolution, when many women joined the workforce and worked in places like factories outside of the home. Like many women today, these women were still expected to complete most of the domestic duties on top of their jobs. However, she argues that this line can get very blurry, since the definition of work itself is a tricky one, and there are many people who complete for-profit work from their homes.

My mom, a lawyer who has worked from home for the past few years, says that there are pros and cons to working remotely. "There's no commute to the office", she says, "but my

bedroom is my office now”. Working from home also means that she doesn’t need to get fully dressed into a professional outfit every day. It allows her to have a more flexible schedule, so she has the opportunity to run errands and complete household tasks throughout the day.

However, she says that ability is both a blessing and a curse, since it is much easier for her to be distracted by non-work tasks when she is working from home. This, on top of her heavy workload, has caused her to pull somewhat frequent all-nighters just to get everything done. She also discusses how her work is valued in her workplace. She has been working at the same law firm for nearly two decades now, and says that her employers are paying less for her work than her level of expertise should be worth. Even though she does not want to be promoted, which would mean an increase in time commitment and responsibilities, recently her bosses have been pushing more and more work on her. My mom won’t say much against her employer, but she’s clearly experiencing a lot more stress and a heavier workload and has received minimal reward or acknowledgement for it.

According to a study by McKinsey & Company, women have experienced improved rates of representation in the workplace from 2016 to 2021. However, women still receive promotions at a far lower rate than men. Women are less likely than men to be hired, and even less likely to be promoted to the role of manager or above. This so-called “broken rung” of the corporate ladder, where women are at a disadvantage from the get-go, is still holding women back. Women of color are especially impacted by this, with both their race and gender contributing to employers’ bias against hiring and promoting them. The study also found that women are experiencing higher levels of burnout than they were before the pandemic, and “the gap in burn out between men and women has almost doubled”. Also, McKinsey & Company concluded that female leaders are more likely to take on additional work outside of their roles,

such as assisting coworkers and employees with difficulties, creating manageable workloads, and ensuring employees' overall well-being. A survey found that female managers were 12% more likely than men to provide emotional support to employees and 7% more likely to check on the overall well-being of their workers. This work goes largely unrecognized, and causes more stress and a heavier workload for these women.

The burden is even heavier on women of color, especially ones who are the only people in the workplace to have their gender identity and race. Since they are the only representative of those identities, they stand out amongst their coworkers. "Their successes and failures are often put under a microscope and they are more likely to encounter comments and behavior that reduce them to negative stereotypes", the McKinsey study says. The weight of coworkers' unfair amount of criticism and expectations can become a heavy burden and a big stressor for these women. Another additional weight on women that causes more burnout is when they have young children. Mothers are often expected to take on a more hands-on role with their children, and dedicate more time to childcare. This means that women have less time to dedicate to work, which means they often find themselves with the choice of either sacrificing sleep or their career goals. For most of my childhood, my mom had more flexible working hours than my dad. She also receives a lower salary than him because of this flexibility. Although both of my parents were very involved in my and my sibling's childhoods, my mom spent more time taking care of us in day-to-day life. In particular, she would drive us to and from school, which added another hour or two of tasks for her to complete that my dad did not often do. After a while, all that driving time adds up. That's one or two hours daily that she could have been working, but instead she chose to sacrifice that work for childcare.

Although both men and women have been spending more time working from home, the experience has been a lot more draining on women. According to an article by Rani Molla, employed women were three times more likely to be their children's main caregiver than their employed male counterparts. Also, roughly 79 percent of men reported a positive work-from-home experience during the pandemic, as compared to just 37 percent of women. So clearly, there is a connection between working women taking on more household responsibilities and childcare on top of their full time jobs, and a lower sense of satisfaction for the work-from-home experience. Unfortunately, this is not an easy problem to solve, it's a deeply-rooted societal issue. In Western society, for many generations people have been raised to expect women to take on the main parental role and take care of the household while men are the main breadwinners. There are exceptions today, of course, but most people (including the women themselves!) have been trained to think it's normal for women to take on the majority of that household burden.

And rest assured, taking care of a child while working is indeed a burden. Anyone who has interacted with small children for an extended period of time can tell you that they require a lot of time and attention. They always want to be active, are easily distracted and have short attention spans, and often seek the attention and approval of their parents. It often goes under-acknowledged, but parenting is a full-time job. So when women are working from home and watching their children, they are basically working two jobs at the same time. Many couples share childcare duties between them so that the load is lighter, but it's still difficult to juggle with a working career. Many women's for-profit work may even be less demanding than the household work and child care they are also expected to do every day. The pressure of so much work leads to higher rates of stress and burnout in women.

Some companies have taken various measures to combat people's burnout, an issue that was exacerbated by the pandemic and subsequent work-from-home order. When companies made the transition to remote work, many unfortunately expected their employees to be on call and available at all times, since the lines between home and work were blurred. Establishing clear boundaries of the work day and time off lowered employees' stress rates and allowed workers to more fully rest outside of work hours. Companies were also able to curb burnout by having managers be more supportive of employees. This includes having managers watch for signs of burnout and adjust accordingly, as well as having frequent check-ins to see what stress levels employees are experiencing. This requires managers to foster an environment of trust and honesty within their workplace, which also contributes to general employee happiness and productivity.

In conclusion, it's a serious and common issue for women to carry a heavier workload than men and receive less acknowledgement for it. To rectify this problem, we need to adjust the way we think about gender roles within the household and at work. Household work should be more evenly distributed so that women do not experience as much stress and distraction throughout their workday at home. Men need to fully acknowledge how much work their wives are contributing, and take on more of that work to lessen their partner's share. Employers also need to make a more conscious effort to hire and promote more women, especially women of color. Although we have seen improvements in the past few years in the growing numbers of women gaining power in the workplace, we still have a long way to go. The societal expectations that we have for women are causing additional stress and burnout their male counterparts are not experiencing. So next time when Becky and Daniel are both working from home, Daniel should be helping with the house and kids more, and Becky should expect it. They're a team, and they

should be putting in roughly the same amount of work. Becky has been experiencing an unfair amount of stress and burnout, and Daniel needs to pull his weight more. Life will be a lot happier for everyone when more people realize this and distribute the workload and acknowledgment between men and women more evenly.

### Works Cited

Interviewed Professor Eileen Boris, the Hull Professor (an endowed chair) in the Department of Feminist Studies and an affiliate professor in the History, Black Studies, and Global Studies Departments at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

Interviewed Renee Jensen, a senior counsel lawyer at a private law firm.

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