

home responsibilities: are they still “her” job?

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“If only I had more time!” “I never seem to have time to finish.” “When I find the time.”

These laments are heard from homemakers and executives, students and teachers . . . and always from Extension workers.

And increasingly, men, women, and children from all income groups are becoming embroiled in the pressing question of: Who does the housework if wife and/or mother works outside the home?

Are you aware of how much time it takes to perform the basic tasks necessary to maintain a household? Have you given thought to the various activities and the time involved? The following Louisiana study, excerpted from a larger Louisiana family time-use study, provides some answers to these questions and others. Louisiana was 1 of 11 states participating in a regional family time-use project.

Methodology

One hundred and five homemakers in two-parent, two-child families in an urban parish (county) in south Louisiana were interviewed. Each homemaker was interviewed twice by a trained interviewer. On the first visit, she was asked to recall how each family member spent his or her time the previous day. This information was recorded on a 24-hour time chart. A second chart was given to the homemaker for the following day. She was told how to record the time spent by each family member on various activities. The homemaker kept both time charts to verify their accuracy with the appropriate family members. The interviewer returned, picked up the charts, and checked them for completeness. Selected demographic information was also obtained at this time.

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Housework Tasks

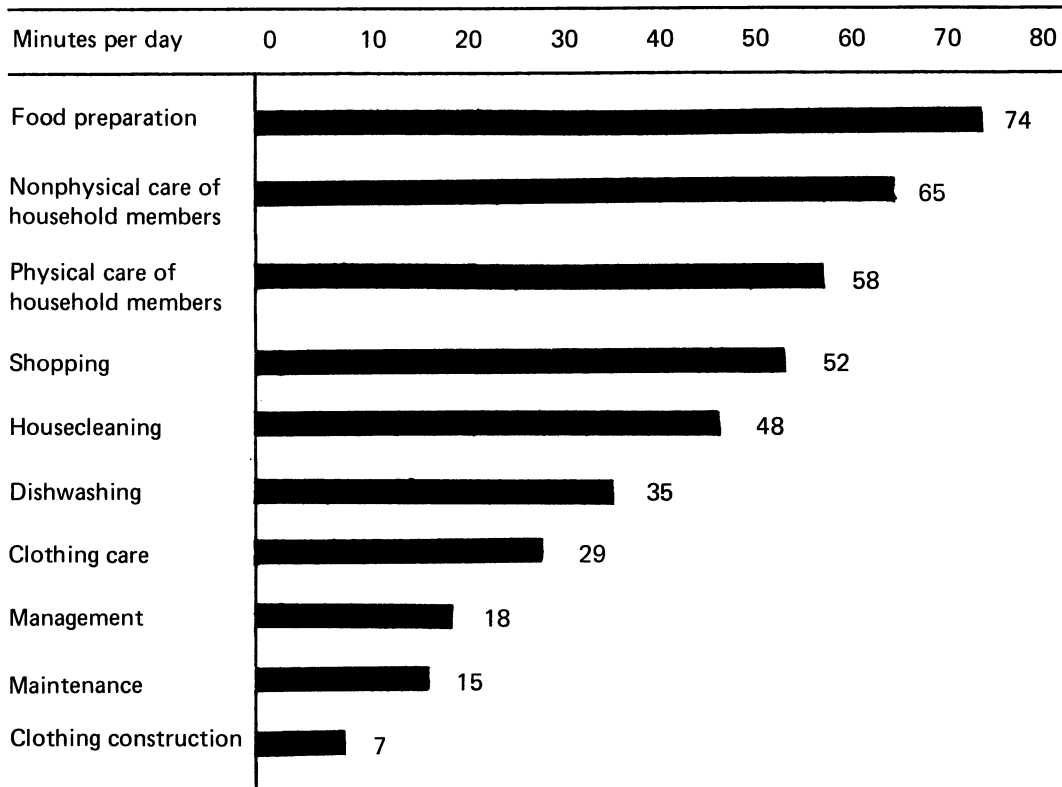
Ten of 18 categories included on the time chart were designated as housework tasks. These tasks were:

1. Food preparation.
2. Dishwashing.
3. Shopping.
4. Housecleaning.
5. Maintenance of home, yard, car, and pets.
6. Care of clothing and household linens.
7. Clothing construction.
8. Physical care of household members.
9. Nonphysical care of household members.
10. Management.

The time spent in performing these tasks was summed to get a measure of total household activities of homemakers.

Findings

Homemakers reported spending an average of 6.7 hours per day in household work. They spent the most time in food preparation and the least in clothing construction (see Figure 1).



Based on a Louisiana study of urban families' time-use, 1978-1979.

Figure 1. Time spent in household tasks by urban homemakers.

Although every homemaker was spending time at household tasks, some were spending far more time than others. Full-time homemakers spent significantly more time in total household work than did homemakers who were employed outside the home. In fact, as hours of employment increased, hours of household work decreased—full-time homemaker, 7.6 hours per day; part-time employed, 6.3 hours; full-time employed, 5.4 hours.

Only one specific task category, dishwashing, was related to employment of the homemaker. Once again, as the number of hours the homemaker worked outside the home increased, the time spent in dishwashing decreased—full-time homemakers, 41 minutes; part-time employed, 32 minutes; full-time employed, 27 minutes.

The study confirms what most every homemaker knows—the primary responsibility and the actual work of the household continues to be the lot of women. . . .

Homemakers with young children spent significantly more time in household work than did those with older children. Time spent in household tasks decreased as the age of the youngest child increased (youngest child less than 1, 8.7 hours per day; 1, 7.1 hours; 2-5, 6.5 hours; 6-11, 5.6 hours; 12-17, 5.4 hours). This was especially evident in time devoted to physical care of family members. A homemaker whose youngest child was less than 1 averaged 2 hours per day in physical care, while a homemaker whose youngest child was between 12 and 17 averaged only 3 minutes a day.

Family income and age of the homemaker weren't significant factors with respect to total time spent on household tasks, but they were factors in the most time-consuming task, food preparation. As family income increased, time spent in food preparation decreased. And homemakers who were less than 25 years old or more than 40 spent significantly less time in preparation of food than did those between 25 and 40.

Homemakers also reported a seasonal variation in the amount of time spent on certain household tasks. More time was spent in food preparation, housecleaning, and maintenance during the summer months (May-August). During cooler weather (January-April), homemakers devoted more time to management, clothing construction, and physical and nonphysical care of household members.

In addition to the question about the amount of time they spent on various tasks, homemakers were asked if there were special ways their families saved time on household activities. Some of their responses were:

"Definitely have a routine—can get things done that way, don't have to constantly plan."

"Hire a maid. I used to spend Saturdays cleaning, but I don't anymore."

"Husband helps me a lot; children are good about helping me. Have your heart in it. If you do, you can get a lot done."

"Working together helps us save time. Sons and husband help willingly. We usually set a time to do most of household activity. We have a regular routine time when we do household chores. Boys know what they do each week, like water plants, laundry, vacuuming, etc. They do a lot of housework. Then, they are free to do what they want."

"My microwave oven and the freezer help me a lot."

"I read everything I can to make housework easier or better. What I do is not very much, but it's done the right way."

Conclusions and Implications

The study confirms what most every homemaker knows—the primary responsibility and the actual work of the household continues to be the lot of women. As might be expected, the study confirms that mothers of young children are the busiest, but their time in child care will decrease as the children grow older and handle their own personal needs. The study also confirms that women who work outside the home repeatedly say that their full load of housework is in reality a second unpaid job with little help from other family members.

The study has many implications for Extension staffers. First, the data can be useful in planning programs, writing newsletters, and in mass media work, because it stresses needs, problems, and a few possible solutions for those who continue to carry the brunt of household work. For example, if time management and increased efficiency in the home are the topics of a program, the audience might compare their time spent on some tasks with time reported as "average" in the study. A newsletter article on consumer shopping tips might include data from the study, such as the finding that an average of 52 minutes a day goes into shopping.

The study's data on seasonal interests in certain tasks can be a guide to Extension personnel when scheduling programs. For example, food preparation and home care topics are more likely to be of interest during the summer when family members are actively involved in such tasks. Programs on management, clothing construction, and care of household members are likely to interest audiences during the cooler months favored for these activities.

The most obvious conclusion of the study is the continuing need of homemakers to improve their efficiency in household work, while also suggesting the pressing need to change attitudes among all family members on their obligation to share the work in the home.
