Trinidad and Tobago Express

Women coming home from work to work
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With the opening of the new school term just one week away, women are busy buying books and uniforms for their children at Unique Book Store on Independence Square, Port of Spain, yesterday. Working women do up to two to three times the amount of domestic chores and child care work compared to men.

Last week the Sunday Express looked at the division of the type of chores assigned to girls and boys as part of gender socialisation and some of the effects it had upon them. This week will address the sexual division of labour in the household and how it affects working mothers.

MOST US sitcoms of the 1950s portray the wife as a happy homemaker greeting her husband as he returns from a hard day's work with a clean house, immaculate children, a warm hug and a hot meal. But nowadays many husbands and wives are both returning from a wearying work day. Still, society expects the female to be the "superhousewife".

In an article from the American Psychological Association entitled "Making Working Families Work" by Rebecca A Clay, it was reported that in 1940 66 per cent of working households consisted of single-earner married couples. By 2000 the percentage had dropped to less than 25 per cent.

It was also stated that working women still did up to two to three times the amount of domestic chores and child care compared to men which becomes a "sore spot" for them and they feel unfairly burdened.

Clinical psychologist Dr Karen Moore told the Sunday Express that though there were currently a lot of women in workplace the expectations of their husband had not necessarily changed and they were not demanding that much extra from them.

Moore said that the types of gender socialisation had not changed and young women were still being raised with the expectation that someday they would be a wife and mother and needed to do household things. She added that women therefore would not necessarily be raised with the expectation of a partner helping out and though more women wanted help with the children their housework load remained the same.

Philip N Cohen, from the University of California, Irvine, wrote in his article "Keeping House and Occupational Segregation in the United States" that the entry of greater numbers of women into the labor force occurred as household services, products, and technology reduced women's housework obligations and increased the demand for female labour in the market.

He noted that the fact that women shoulder most of the housework even when they do paid work is itself a source of gender inequality.

"Women's higher rates of paid employment have in fact contributed to an increase in their share of all work," he stated.

In a December 2005 study "Reconciling Work and Family: The Case of Trinidad and Tobago" done for the International Labour Organisation by head of UWI Centre for Gender and Development Studies Prof Rhoda Reddock and independent consultant/ educator, Yvonne Bobb-Smith, the major issue looked at was how difficult it was for parents to combine work with family responsibilities.

The study noted that while challenges of the work and family have always existed they have taken on new forms today and the reasons include urbanisation and decline of intimate community relations, increasing workplace demands, absence of family...
members to provide child-care and family support, insistence of women, including grandmothers, for a life beyond the household and non-synchronisation of work hours with school hours.

It also quoted a 2004 Central Statistical Office report on the total number of hours spent on unpaid housework (including house cleaning, washing laundry and meal preparation) and other activities in a one week period. The total hours for males was 671,231, a little less than half of the 1,252,740 hours calculated for females.

"The tendency for domestic tasks and responsibilities to become the prerogative of women in families still pervades society," the study stated.

Reddock, in an interview with the Sunday Express, said that interviews in the study do suggest that some men are involved in housework, though the sexual division of labour continued. She explained that more men were involved in traditional household tasks such as transporting children to and from school, house maintenance, gardening and taking children to social activities.

The study also noted that there was an increased sensitivity among some men towards sharing domestic responsibilities and some groom children for school and supervise homework.

Though some husbands were pitching in with housework, albeit most of them in traditional forms, what about the children? Are they lending a hand to keep the house in order?

Reddock said that generally parents today were giving children less work and fewer responsibilities. She noted that even though the parents felt overwhelmed, including the mothers, they tended not to pressure their children to assist in domestic chores.

Of the parents and caregivers interviewed for the 2005 study only 0.5 per cent claimed to give children responsibility for domestic tasks. In the past these tasks were given to teach children to become adults with girls groomed to be mothers and wives and boys groomed to be fathers, wage earners and entrepreneurs, the study noted.

Reddock explained that one of the reasons children do less housework was that women usually had problems developing strategies to share the domestic work load. And, to avoid additional stress of having to hassle children to do work, or still having to monitor and manage the activity when it is being done, many women claim to just do everything themselves.

Moore commented that going out to work was just one part of changing the mentality of women and she still hears women talk about getting up early in the morning and "getting things ready for everybody".

The 2005 study noted that society had not fully accepted the right of women to work outside the home and women's economic activity is often justified "as a means of supplementing her spouse's income or to provide income in the absence of a male partner".

"A woman's acceptance of paid employment when she has 'no real reason' causes her to have deep-seated feelings of guilt, which result in her making every effort to personally ensure that the family is not inconvenienced by her work outside the home," the study stated.

But what are the effects on women who have to juggle both roles as housewife/caregiver and hard working mother?

Tara Ramoutar, representative of the national committee of Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action (CAFRA), told the Sunday Express that the impact could be both negative and positive. On the positive side the woman could see herself as independent and stronger as she shoulders and embraces both sets of responsibilities.

She noted that besides economic reasons women also go out to work because they want to have independence.

One of the negative impacts, however, could be depression for the woman, who has to face a lot of housework upon returning from work. Ramoutar noted that this could adversely affect both the job and the relationship with the family.

She added that some might not be financially well off enough to get counselling or provide medication to deal with these stresses.

Ramoutar advised that men needed to be more responsible and to lend greater assistance in the home and to the family as a team needed each link in the chain to assist.

Reddock and Bobb-Smith also stated in their assessment that facilities for child-care for children from three months, elderly care, after-school care, vacation programmes and other necessary support systems were not readily available in an accessible, effective or systematic in Trinidad and Tobago.

And without adequate facilities and support systems, or husbands chipping in a bit more at home, it is left to working mothers to continue their balancing act of being "super".