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Public & Private; Abhors a Vacuum

By ANNA QUINDLEN

Americans have gotten a little tired of Sweden, and it's not just because of the model wars, in which American women are forced out of cover girl positions by Swedes and driven to seek work at auto shows. It's all the social policy superiority.

You might be researching sex education and you discover that there is a program for Swedish eighth-graders that teaches sex education AND microbiology. Teen pregnancies plummet while the number of research scientists doubles. Day care, maternity leave, the elderly -- the American motto has become "I don't want to hear one more word about how well they do it in Sweden."

So it was oddly soothing to discover that even in Sweden, men don't do their fair share of the housework. They don't do it in Japan or in Cuba, either, or in America. In fact, they don't help around the house much anywhere. (Note the sex-specific use of the verb "to help." When men do dishes, it is called helping. When women do dishes, it is called life.)

All this was contained in a report issued by the International Labor Organization, a United Nations agency. The report said that, worldwide, women work longer hours than men and are paid less. They also have primary -- and sometimes sole -- responsibility for the care of their family and their home.

In Japan, for instance, the report said men spend only 15 minutes a day on chores around the house. This is how those 15 minutes might be spent by an American man:

Minute one: Decide to take out the garbage.

Minute two: Look in cabinets to scope out snack possibilities after chore is finished.

Minute five: Check score of Giants game.

Minute seven: Find soda can in garbage. Go through house looking for individual who was environmentally wanting.

Minute 10: Return to kitchen and place can on counter.

Minute 12: Stand in kitchen and yell, "Where are the twist-ties?"

Minute 13: Wait for answer.

Minute 14: Smash trash with flat of hand and conclude that it is not overfull.

Minute 15: Take peanuts from cabinet and return to den.

The I.L.O. report is a very serious document, filled with disparities between the job status of men and women, and various remedies for those disparities. The housework problem is not an easy one. In Cuba a law requires men to help around the house, but enforcement is a problem. ("Hey, you in the lawn chair -- get in there and fold some laundry!") The end result is that in Havana, 82 percent of all women say they perform all the domestic chores in their households. And in the Nordic countries when men's working hours were reduced they used the extra time not for housework but for what are described as "leisure activities," or what my grandmother once called "lying around like a bump on a log."

I am grateful that this phenomenon has been quantified because in the past I have been attacked relentlessly by those who said that the sentence "Men in the home are inanimate objects" was a sweeping generalization.

There were complaints that I had exaggerated the numbers of fathers who would be statistically likely to say, "Halloween costume? What Halloween costume?" on Oct. 30. (My studies found that the numbers were remarkably similar to those for men likely to say, "Is there any wrapping paper?" on the evening of Dec. 24.)

The consensus was that I had judged the household contributions of men harshly. "What about hedge clipping?" one reader complained. "Did you include hedge clipping in your conclusions?" Skepticism greeted my delineation of the gender-based "What?" phenomenon. Like this:

Woman returning from job at which she works longer hours for less pay: Why didn't you take this garbage out?

Spouse: What garbage?

And so while I find the I.L.O. study disturbing, at least I have some empirical evidence to support my "Dishwasher? What dishwasher?" hypothesis. Of course, the statistics can work both ways. Some American man seeing this will surely notice that his confreres don't even do their fair share of the housework in Sweden. I am compelled to add, however, that the authors of the I.L.O. report say men in Sweden are doing better than men anywhere else. Which figures.

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