

Domestic? Help!

Shannon Moffett, MD FAAEM



AS WE ALL STRUGGLE TO RE-ARRANGE OUR WORK/

home lives to meet our current COVID-infused reality, I'd like to do my part to bust the myth that persists — more perniciously in the pandemic era—that it is possible to be an emergency physician in a two-career family and also do all the work of a standard

American household. I'd like to alleviate the palpable shame I've felt coming from women confessing that they are drowning and can't seem to find enough hours in the day to do all that is expected of them. To start, I'll lay bare my own domestic set-up, in place before the pandemic. My cleaning lady — you don't so much hear the phrase “cleaning guy,” probably because in the U.S., 91.5% of the 2.2 million people working as domestic help are women¹ — comes twice a week, for four to six hours each time. She does all the laundry, any dishes we've left in the sink, and cleans and organizes every room in the house, including the au pair's apartment.

Yes, I have an au pair, too. And my mom lives with us (well, did until we sent her on what I hope is a temporary break from our high-COVID-risk house). She cooks dinner most nights, and does the dishes then and on

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the rare nights when I cook. She also does the bedtime ritual with my youngest most evenings, and wakes him up in the mornings, too, if I sleep in after a late shift, or am up early trying to get to an early shift, or am trying to get some administrative work done in the morning — so basically all the time. I know my mom can do all those things because when I was a kid, she did them while working full-time as a journalist. On the nights she wasn't home because she was working, I — starting at 10-years-old or so — made dinner for myself and my sister. I doubt I did the dishes — she must have done them when she got home. My dad....didn't. When I try to think about what he did do around the house — not taking out the trash (that was my mom), not home repairs (my mom), not making the larger salary (you guessed it) — I have two pictures in my head: one, of him hunched over the paper-strewn dining room table, demanding absolute silence while he did the taxes (that's another thing I have someone else do now).

The other is of the Christmas morning my father set himself up on a chair in the center of the kitchen, newspaper in hand, and declared — after consulting the baking instructions affixed to the ham we would be eating — that his task would be “bringing

the ham to room temperature” so it would be ready for my mom to put it in the oven.

My best friend from residency told me on the phone the other day that she doesn't want to increase her cleaning lady's hours, even though with everyone home there is more cleaning to do, because the thought of her three sons sitting there and watching someone else clean up their stuff is like nails on a blackboard to her. Which I get: No one needs three more ham-warmers. Then in the same breath she told me she didn't mind if they saw her cleaning.

Personally, I hate it when my kids catch me cleaning (cue my mom's voice in my head saying “pffft, well, fat chance of that happening”). I am an emergency physician and an educator, both of which I think are really important jobs. As is cleaning the house. But it's not my job. It's not, frankly, my husband's, either — he has a different important job, one that keeps him traveling. So even if he wanted to do more around the house — which, to be fair, I actually think he does, but don't get me started on how the assuming of rote chores allows those so inclined to avoid the specific, time-sensitive, and exhausting emotional work required for a functioning household — half the time he physically can't. I don't want my kids to see the housework as our job, because I don't want to spread the dangerous fiction that it's possible to do the jobs we do and also deal with all the housework. And I really don't want them to think that, at points when the task allocation has broken down, it's the woman career-haver that should step in to take up the slack.

Those reading this will mainly have the means to hire domestic help, and even to do so without engaging in the exploitation of those workers that some say led to the decline of their role as an integral part American life after the 1950's. At that time, ironically, as more and more women went to work, fewer and fewer households had outside help to get the housework done.²

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It is discomfiting, for sure, that for us having the means to engage others in our household work has basically meant the transfer of that work onto the backs of other women. But on the other hand, each of the women involved in the care of my house — including my mom — had some choice in the matter, and a chance to negotiate (and renegotiate) their roles absent any concern that a disagreement would lead to the break-up of their family. At least as of 2010, most male academic physicians had a spouse who did not work full-time (86% of women had spouses that worked full-time).³ Assuming that the men's non-working spouses were mainly women, one has to assume that the male physicians' success also relied on the labor of a woman, one who might have a harder time renegotiating.

It's too early to have anything reliable to cite, but our current global catastrophe has likely affected U.S. domestic workers disproportionately, as they tend to be non-white, under-insured and without labor protections. While my friend wants to hide her cleaning lady from her children,

I want my kids to see us giving paid vacation to ours, paying her through the shelter-in-place orders even though they meant she couldn't come to our house, and respecting the job she does as a vital one. Ditto the au pair. Ditto the lawn guys. Ditto the math tutor. And my mom? I want my kids to see my mom teasing me for not doing housework and me laughing, shamelessly — because I feel no shame. ●

References

1. Economic Policy Institute. 2020. Current Population Survey Extracts, Version 1.0.8, <https://microdata.epi.org>.
2. Bloom, E. The Decline of Domestic Help. *The Atlantic*, Sept 23, 2015, accessed online 08-26-20 at <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2015/09/decline-domestic-help-maid/406798/>
3. Jolly et al. Gender differences in time spent on parenting and domestic responsibilities by high-achieving young physician-researchers. *Ann Intern Med* 2014 Mar 4;160(5):344-53

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