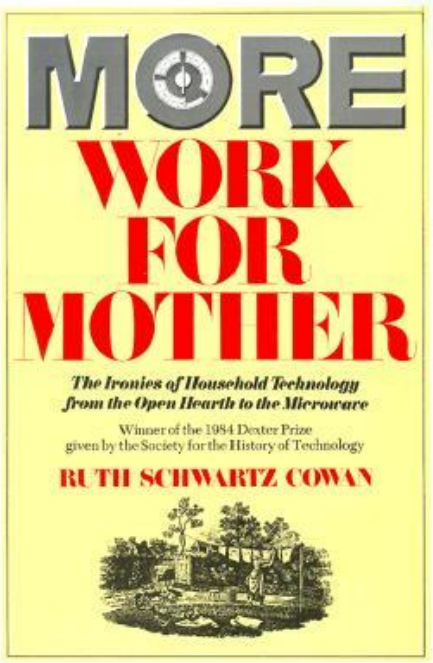

More Work For Mother: The Ironies Of Household Technology From The Open Hearth To The Microwave

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In this classic work of women's history (winner of the 1984 Dexter Prize from the Society for the History of Technology), Ruth Schwartz Cowan shows how and why modern women devote as much time to housework as did their colonial sisters. In lively and provocative prose, Cowan explains how the modern conveniences—washing machines, white flour, vacuums, commercial cotton—seemed at first to offer working-class women middle-class standards of comfort. Over time, however, it became clear that these gadgets and gizmos mainly replaced work previously conducted by men, children, and servants. Instead of living lives of leisure, middle-class women found themselves struggling to keep up with ever higher standards of cleanliness.

More Work For Mother: The Ironies Of Household Technology From The Open Hearth To The Microwave Details

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From Reader Review More Work For Mother: The Ironies Of Household Technology From The Open Hearth To The Microwave for online ebook

Melissa says

This book is a little dated (written in the early 80s) but still has tons of interesting information. The premise is that although household technology keeps improving, women still spend the same amount of time doing housework -- why is that?
Since this book predates Amazon there is no way for her to know that things have come full circle. I hadn't realized that housewives of old had practically everything they needed delivered to them. With the development of the automobile, so too did mother's job change to driving around to stores and running errands all day. With that lens, the rise of home delivery again is a wonderful thing, especially for new mothers with babies and toddlers at home.
It was also fascinating to read about the different lives led by the "comfortable" and the rest of us over the last 100 or so years. For example, she points out how tenements had no kitchen storage and just one table that served all needs (homework, piecework, meal preparation, and eating) so that "good manners" of place settings and such were really only for the well-to-do.
It's great stuff, and essential reading for any mother struggling with why there are still so few hours in a day.

Clare O'Beara says

I sought out this scholarly work after finding it hidden among the references of another more recent work; that book had two women's names among its references. In the notes of this book, P234- 249, I counted 113 names I could be sure were female. Index P251 - 257; I counted 30 names I could be sure were female.
Looking at the American home from pre-industrial days, when a household made most of what it required and traded for the rest, to modern times, the author asks what work was assigned to men or women and how each changed. She finds that a woman's work was laborious and heavy before piped water and electric or gas supply. Thus, people often weren't very clean and their homes were poorly lit and crowded.
As work became available in cities and manufactured goods circulated, the concept of a housewife was invented. This was a woman whose labour was all or mostly at home, cleaning, feeding, clothing the family. Nursing the sick was part of her work, also midwifery and laying out the dead.
The author says that work traditionally assigned to men, like gathering firewood, hunting meat and driving the cart, shrank or vanished and women got to do that work. The reason was electric and gas power, shops and cars. The author never mentions that the men looked after the horses, harness and carts, a job in itself.
Women had appliances invented for them, but the early ones were not much improvement, like washing machines which still required sopping and mangling, then ironing. Families needed to earn more to pay for; stoves which needed cleaning and blacking; refrigerators; sewing machines; washing machines; cars; electric cookers; better washing machines, electric irons; vacuums and more.
Some women worked in every time period, so we get to see the richer and poorer homes and jobs, and we note that a woman always had staff if she was wealthy or a woman for a day a week if she was poor, to do the heavy work, usually washing and cleaning. The cost of labour rose as immigrant women reduced in number and the Depression made hiring people impossible for the poor. Thus machinery was all the more necessary if children were to get to school clean and fed and a man to his work.

I noted no mention of people with disabilities - what happened if someone had polio, lost an arm or went blind? Were they not mentioned in the literature?
I also saw little mention of the children being made to do work, except in the chapter where we are told that girls learned from their mothers and boys from their fathers what tasks to do and how. The later chapters show children at school or at play, when older kids were pressed into service to mind younger ones and help with cooking and cleaning or piecework for an outside employer in reality. Certainly in my home I regretted being taught how to make a pot of tea and answer the door, as it seemed I was always called upon. This despite the fact that by five I had read several books in which the boys got to go out and have adventures but the girls had to stay home and help around the house, so I had decided that I was going to be like a boy.
I really enjoyed reading about the households of America in all their variations. The photos and drawings of the day are particularly good. The author seems to have found no shortage of sources, from accounts of daily lives to theses on plumbing or gas refrigerators.

I borrowed this book from the Dublin Business School library. This is an unbiased review.

Dan says

A professor I had once alerted me to the phenomenon of books that give away the whole argument in the title, and explained that academics loved them because they could say they understood the argument without having read the book. (His examples were Peasants into Frenchmen: The Modernization of Rural France, 1870-1914 and Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.)

Cowan's *More Work for Mother* is similar. The argument is that technological improvements did not result in less domestic work for individuals, and that the burden of that was shifted onto women. It's an extremely compelling, persuasive argument. The book is beautifully written and very readable. This is a tour de force and probably the best history of technology that I've ever read.

Stephen says

Throughout the 20th century, households were transformed by a new abundance of labor-saving devices, from washing machines to toaster ovens, and processed goods that reduced housewives' workloads, leaving them free to learn trades and professions of their own and fully participate in the modern world. But in the second decade of the 21st century, American women are just as chore-taxed as ever, lamenting of the 'second shift' that awaits them upon arriving home. Despite the many machines now investing our homes, most of the work still has to be done by hand, for Parkinson's Law holds true there as well as anywhere else: work expands to fill the time available for its completion. In More Work for Mother, author Ruth Cowan demonstrates how gadgets and goods created new work while eliminating others, and argues that women will not be free from drudgery until housework is freed from the realm of 'femininity' to the point that men won't feel emasculated by laundry.

The devices and goods of the 19th and 20th century – refrigerators, washing machines, microwaves, convenient bags of flour, even more convenient no-bake cheesecake mixes, even more convenient instant cereal -- did indeed reduce a lot of labor. In fact, for men they reduced virtually all household work. More Work for Other opens with a history of housework. Although modern readers might be aware that women's traditional role was in the home, men's traditional role was in the home, as well; prior to industrialism, men

didn’t pack a lunch pail and disappear into the country for a day at work. The home and the work of most families were intimately connected, typically inseparable. Women may have baked bread, but it was men who gathered and ground it; women may have washed clothes, but men chopped the wood and let children lug in the water. But while men’s roles in the household largely vanished, women found that work remained constant. The availability of affordable clothing reduced the need for sewing and repairing, but increased the burden of laundry, and standards of cleanliness climbed as the ability to clean increased. Laundry and scrubbing agents meant that minor stains could no longer be tolerated, necessitating near-daily cleaning regimens. And those new labor-saving devices were often fragile things, needing frequent cleaning to avoid their works being gummed up. Additionally, for middle class or wealthier women, the availability of do-it-yourself machines meant that retaining maids and other servants was a sinful waste – never mind that doing it themselves meant more hours of their own time spent doing the labor, regardless of advertisers’ claims of quick ease-of-use. There were options that might have truly revolutionized household chores – commercial kitchens with thrice-daily delivery, commercial laundries, cooperatives, apartment hotels – but most fell by the wayside, either because of cultural imperatives or because of market forces.

Although not as sweeping as Susan Strasser's Never Done, what's lost in extensive narrative is replaced by more serious analysis and an abundance of good points made. Cowan notes, for instance, that the increase of standardized products destroyed easy class differences: while in the mid-19th century a street urchin and the scion of a wealthy businessman would look as different as night and day just judging from their clothes' cleanliness, today both could wear the same products, and the fact that vitually all homes have water and heating means that no one is denied the ability to shower every day. The interior of homes, too, are far closer than they once were; the absence of gadgets and electricity might have once marked a hovel, but these days not even campers will tolerate going without a refrigerator. Her driving point is that the fact that homes are now filled with gadgets and manufactured articles doesn't mean that homes are no longer productive; mothers are still 'producing' clean bathrooms, fed children, and presentable clothing. If the labor women perform was priced as though they were in the open market, people would never assume homemaking to be unproductive. Ultimately, Cowan believes women will be freed from drudgery only when we relax fanatic standards regarding cleanliness and the housework that remains is stripped, through cultural or technological means, of its traditionally female association so that men will pitch in more. If that argument, made in 1985, has lost some of its edge in a 21st century peopled by "Mr.Moms" , most of the work has not.

Kelsey Bryant says

3.5 stars. This was actually a fascinating read. It's an interestingly written history of American housework . . . daily life is one of my favorite subjects in history, and this one gave me plenty of new insights, such as how and when the transition from fireplaces to stoves was made, and when and why wealthier families stopped employing servants. I'll be referring to it again if/when I write 19th-century historical fiction. :) It is written with a feminist slant, but the social analysis is eye-opening and intriguing. It really is ironic that with all the household technology we have, people (particularly women) are spending almost as much time on housework as their ancestors. Though machines make it easier, standards of cleanliness have risen, and so our houses still keep us busy.

Christohper says

The conclusion destroys the arguments made in the book.
The author states that she had to choose between washing a shirt her daughter had stained versus just leaving it. A third choice (rather obvious) was to wipe the stain with a wet cloth. She never looks at any of the issues she brings up in complex, nuanced or just unconventional way. The arguments are very limited in geographic scope. She only discusses America. The author should have talked to an engineer, an anthropologist, a historian and an economist.
An anthropologist would have described different ways of life. Other cultures divide labor different from the author's own personal experience.
A historian would have explained how life was different in the past and performed or explained historical practices. Had the author merely attempted to carry water she would have had a whole chapter on a rather interesting but not obvious technological change (potable water from a tap).
An engineer would have explained to the author different way to solve problems and in collaboration with an economist explain the WHY and HOW of technological adaption and success in the marketplace.
When the author states that automatic washing machines created an unending pile of laundry she fails to mention that repairing of clothing became a non issue as the price of clothing dropped.
The book covers the history of technological adaptation well but does not make any compelling or well supported arguments.

Joy says

I've loved this book for a long time. Cowan here sets out to investigate the ways that industrialization changed housework in America. She challenges the presumption that industrialization has to do with factories and machines alone by focusing in on what she calls work process, or the serial steps a person has to take to accomplish a task, as well as changing technological systems, or interdependent infrastructures (washing machines require soap that had to be made or purchased as well as water, etc- to focus on the machine alone is to miss the way it restructures social processes). Specifically Cowan shows the ways that, throughout the nineteenth century, tasks usually performed by men in the home- cutting wood for fuel, butchering, milling flour, etc.- became commercialized. With the advent of wood stoves, families purchased coal for heat. Meat was purchased instead of raised and slaughtered, while flour was purchased instead of home-milled. While this created the necessity for men to participate in a cash (not barter) economy to pay for these goods, women were left with increasing amounts of work, including more elaborate baking that follows from having flour (instead of previous quick-breads), or the need to carefully clean the glass coverings on gas lamps (as opposed to making candles). Cowan points out that specialized craft knowledge stayed with women in the home much longer than with men, whose major skills were gradually oriented towards participating in commercial life. The emerging industrial economy set up the conditions for separate spheres by "outsourcing" men's work in the home.

Cowan goes on to challenge the notion that industrialization left the housewife with nothing to do, thereby undermining the truism that the early 20th century witnessed the transformation of the household from a center of production to a center of consumption. Not entirely, says Cowan. In fact, women "produced" all sorts of things, but they were different from before. Instead of hauling water in buckets and heating it for baths, women had to produce clean bathrooms and clean laundry, for example. I really love how Cowan investigates the alternative schemes tried out to commercialize "women's work," including cooperative kitchens, apartment hotels, and commercial laundry. The final part of the book looks at how as the standards of living/demands for sanitation continued to increase in the interwar period, the expectations for cleanliness also increased, creating more work of a new kind for housewives.

What I particularly like about Cowan is that she rejects the stereotypical Marxist-feminist approach that characterizes the development of separate spheres as necessarily oppressive. Instead, she shows us how some technologies succeeded in America because both women and men chose to adopt technologies that would bolster privacy and autonomy of the individual family over communal living. At the same time, even if new household technologies did create more work than before, women often viewed them as "liberating, rather than oppressive, agents (191)." They often saw their work as having "tremendous value." This is not to reject the basis of Second Wave critiques of separate sphere politics; it is just to avoid viewing women's work throughout history with a judgment or disdain that had little place in their understanding of their lives and work.

David Dinaburg says

There's a parable that I heard recently that sums this book up pretty well: frog soup. You can't just drop a frog into boiling water, but if the water starts out cold, and the heat is ever-so-gradually increased, before you or the frog knows it, there is no more frog and no more water but instead, a pot of soup. More Work for Mother can be broken down into a number of constituent parts, each a synecdoche on its own, but my favorite bit of "soup" is the vacuum cleaner.

Such is the tale: before, cleaning the rugs required someone physically strong—typically the husband—to lift and carry heavy rugs. Then, someone with much energy and more spare time—typically the child(ren)—beat the rugs. The remaining task, sweeping the area where the rug once lay, was left to the wife. En totale, the work of cleaning a rug was very intense, and rarely done: spring cleaning was once-a-year—the spring, duh—for a reason. But now, oh, now, in this wonderful atomic future, the rugs, they *must* be clean, because it is ever-so-simple to flip the switch and push the electronic sweeper around a bit. Guess who gets to run the vacuum while the rest of the household is excused from the lifting and the beating? Well, yes, it is mother! And what chores supplanted lifting the rugs or beating the rugs while mother vacuums? Nothing, of course, the home is a place of leisure. For men. And children. The frog gets a bit hotter.

There are many more examples, each interesting in their own way. White flour was surprisingly and particularly interesting from a historical standpoint: the steam engine unshackled mills from rivers and shifted industrial concentration to centralized factories, allowing the growth of urbanization. White flour "*…is composed of very small particles of the endosperm of the grain, and lacks the germ and the bran.*" It didn't spoil as quickly as the whole grains ground at the local grist; it fact, it keep long enough to be shipped overseas to feed the foreign armies of the Napoleonic Wars. Once those wars were over, the industrial mills—created and optimized to grind ultrafine white flour—flooded U.S. markets with cheap white flour, which used to be the province of socio-economic posturing between the wealthy; cakes and fluffy breads became de rigueur.

That's pretty great, right? Cheap flour! No more need for the laborious work of hauling grains to the gristmill, a task typically relegated to the physically stronger male of the household. No more need for hand-grinding grain, a tedious task usually left for children! Everyone has more time thanks to white flour! Oh, but...well, everyone but mother:

> The course flours that were produced by hand grinding or grist milling of wheat and rye were prepared into "quickbreads," porridges, and griddle cakes, none of which required complex or laborious preparations. Yeast breads, when prepared by the standard technique of the time, required hard labor (in the kneading) and considerable attention to details (particularly in maintaining yeast cultures)

And what chores supplanted reaping and hauling the grain or hand-grinding while mother kneads or whisks? You guessed it; nothing, of course, the home is a place of leisure. For men, and children, remember? The frog becomes the soup.

Oh, but don't worry mother, technology will save you:

> The eggbeater, which was invented and marketed during the middle decades of the [19th] century, may have eased the burden of this work somewhat; but, unfortunately the popularity of the beater was accompanied by the popularity of angel food cakes, in which eggs are the only leavening, and yolks and whites are beaten separately—thus doubling the work.

Angel food cake has fallen out of favor, probably because it takes the same effort of buy an Entenmann's pound cake as it does to buy angel food cake; which is to say, none. "What we obtain too cheap, we esteem too lightly: it is dearness only that gives every thing its value." Thomas Paine, but for desserts.

More Work for Mother remains timeless and is a comprehensive text that should be required reading by every technological futurist who believes progress makes life better by default. It explains the ever-expanding desires of society better than anything I've ever read: easy to wash clothes because of washing machines? Clothes should be cleaner. Easy to bathe because of running water, water heaters, bathtubs? Personal hygiene must be improved. Easy to contact people because of telephones? Everyone must be available twenty-four hours a day. *Ad astra*, infinitum, forever and ever. Enjoy your soup.

Erika Mulvenna says

Harder to get through than Never Done by Susan Strasser or Just a Housewife by Glenna Matthews, and it covers about the same material.

Mark Bowles says

A. Introduction: Housework and its tools
1. "Industrialization of the home" took place between 1860 and 1960
2. Household and market labor are similar in 3 ways
a) Both depend on non-human energy sources
b) The household is part of a larger economic system (we depend on others to bake our bread)
c) Households use tools that they don't understand or manufacture
3. This book looks at the history of housework and the tools with which it is performed
B. The Invention of Housework: The Early Stages of Industrialization
1. Household convienences in the 19th did not save time (ex. hand driven washing machine, egg beaters) because they reorganized the work to make it more complex
2. Example: the flour industry
a) When flour mills became industrialized in 1820 they offered a new fine white flour
b) This increased work for mother because this flour allowed more deliate cakes (angel-food) to be baked. Also white breads.
3. Example: the stove
a) Cast iron cooking replaced the hearth
b) Stoves required less fuel and provided more efficient heating

c) This brought more work because it allowed more complex meals to be cooked
d) The housewife could fast broil, slow simmer, and bake all at the same time.
4. The technologies decreased work for men but increased it for women
a) For men: Less wood had to be chopped, Piped household water, manufactured shoes
b) For women: Manufactured clothers meant more laundry, oil lamps required the cleaning of soot
C. Changes in Household Technology in the 20th
1. This century consists of 8 interlocking technological systems (food, clothing, health care, transportation, water, gas, electricity, petroleum)
2. The shift from production to consumption (food, clothing health care)
3. In order to use these technologies someone had to leave the home to get them (transportation)
4. Household utility systems (water): While this decreased the need for carrying water, new standards of clenlyness were adopted (cleaning bathroom, floors, toilets)
5. Household utility systems (gas, electricity, oil): The only work that this removed was that done by the man
D. Household Technology and Work (1900-1940)
1. The differences between the housework of the rich and poor were shrinking
2. Golden years (1900-1920)
a) The upper class: had paid servants, but this did not make her a lady of leisure (see John's book). They spent 60 hr/week cleaning, providing meals, dealing with children
b) Lower class: Less work because they lived in tenament buildings with other families, no storage areas, children and mothers worked
3. Between the wars (1920-1940)
a) Upper class: beginning to obtain washing machines, refrigerators, autos
(1) The was the period of the proletarianization of the household
(2) The washing machine did away with the laundry
(3) The refrigerator did away with delivery service
(4) The vacuum did away with the servants
E. The Post War Years
1. There was a spread of affluence allowing the household to have more appliances and therefore increasing the complexity of work
2. Housework becomes homoginized: Both the upper class and lower class housewives are doing the same job
3. There is more work for mother in a modern home because there is no one there to help her. Kids have new found after school activities that the mother is the driver for.
4. This is further complicated by the working mother.

Kathy says

I give this book 4 stars, but I have to qualify that. I was extremely motivated and interested in the subject matter because I was doing some family history research and writing about how my ancestors lived their daily lives, with a special focus on home life. So I came to the book with a purpose. Although scholarly in its approach it was quite readable, with photographs and drawings to enhance various chapters.

The author's main thesis is that as innovation and products developed in the U.S. household work shifted away from being a family affair and rested more heavily on the woman of the house, or the mother. Thus, as work became "easier" men and children were no longer absolutely needed to help with chores. Women, using more and more household appliances and conveniences, could do all the work by themselves.

This, of course, is a great oversimplification of the author's work. There are many, many other contributing factors that played into how household work was accomplished and Ruth Schwartz Cowan does a good job of considering these.

John says

I enjoyed reading this book, but I was constantly wavering on whether I was on board with her arguments or not. I completely agree with what I thought was her basic argument- generally in American history over the last couple centuries, technological achievements have tended to eliminate "men's" household work but not "woman's" work. For example, men used to have to spend a lot of time gathering fuel for fires, felling and chopping up trees. Then women tended the fires. But as coal and oil replaced wood for fires, that job started to disappear for men, while women still had to tend the fires, and sometimes their jobs got worse, as coal fires were smoky and messy. Also, obviously, houses have gotten bigger over time, and since it was seen as 'woman's work' to clean the houses, their jobs have become harder and more time consuming.
I was a little puzzled by Cowan's argument that innovations which would help alleviate housework have "failed". She uses commercial laundries and ready made meal delivery services as examples, and argues that these were attempted in the 1920s but didn't pan out, because people valued their private lives at home and would rather purchase washing machines and cook their own food. But these things didn't really die out, they still exist. Lots of people send their laundry out and buy ready cooked meals, especially in cities. It seems like the same economic calculation for everything- every person needs to decide if they are willing to pay for the services. Lots of people are not willing or able to pay, so they do laundry at home and cook their own meals. Cowan sort of gets around to writing about this at the end, when she argues that what we really need to do is get rid of this idiotic idea that men can't do dishes or cook or do laundry, that somehow women are the people who are supposed to do these jobs. I agree with her that this is ridiculous.
I also felt like she should have spent at least a little more time on peer pressure as a factor in woman's work. She writes about advertisements, but it seems like family pressure and church pressure have probably been just as important as ads. Nobody wants to be the one bringing a store bought pie to a family get together if everyone else is making their own. You can't contribute a recipe (or several) to a church cookbook if you can't cook from scratch. There just tends to be this general expectation for women that they know how to cook, not that they HAVE to for financial reasons, but that they are ABLE to. That expectation isn't really there for men, except maybe for grilling. Women are expected to take pride in not taking the easy way out by purchasing a ready made pie. Maybe I just have this on the brain because I read this over Thanksgiving.

Kirsti S. says

MCL.

Pretty interesting. I think she makes her case that technology hasn't necessarily saved much work for women, but I would have liked her to spend a little more time exploring the suggestions for alternatives.

Michael says

In "An Introduction: Housework and Its Tools" she places household work within the stream of industrialization of America. Household were industrialized form 1860-1960, at the same time as the

idealized households emerged as retreat from a heartless world. Much of the irony of this observation results from the observation that women were users of technologies that embedded them firmly within market relations all along. Like the male and female workers who went out into the factories, women working in the homes of America were increasingly confronted with technologies which they had not build and the internal workings of which they did not understand. Since housewives cannot repair the tools with which they work "houseworkers are as alienated from the tools with which they labor as assembly-line people and blast furnace operators." (p. 7) While men's work became more specialized, housewives in the 20th Century remained the last Janes of all Trades from which the Jacks have disappeared.

Cowan is interested in understanding why the gendered household division of labor has proceeded as it has. To do this she examines the tools of household work. She examines the "work process" and the "technological system" that surrounds these tools. By understanding process, we come to understand who is actually doing the work. By understanding system, we can understand all of the parts that go into making changes in work possible. For instance, the system of technology which brings indoor plumbing is the underpinning of our increased standards of personal hygiene.

"Housewifery: Household Work and Household Tools under Pre-Industrial Conditions" draws an initial connection between the rise of capitalism in Early Modern Europe and the institution of household work. Freed from feudal constraints, the early modern yeomen and their wives developed a household economy. It was industrialization, not capitalism that lead from "Housewifery and the Doctrine of Separate Spheres." As industrialization drew men out of the home, it left women in the home to guard a separate sphere of morality and uplift in a heartless world of industrial capitalist competition. Cowan makes the essential contribution of adding in the tools of housework to help us understand the material conditions under which the doctrine of separate spheres emerges. She focuses on "Household Tools and Household Work" by approaching what it took to create a simple one pot meal in colonial New England. She finds that the process that a family undertook to cook the meal relied upon the work of both men and women, each having essential parts to play in the process. Men would harvest the grain and grind it into meal and women would assemble the ingredients and do the cooking on the open hearth. Though these divisions were not absolute, the cooperation of man and wife was essential to the family's survival. Women who tried to do without men or visa versa would have live far less healthy lives.

"The Household Division of Labor" ensured that men and women were socialized to different roles. Looking at the experience of a woman named Rebecca Burlend, who's husband was injured and unable to harvest the wheat crop, she demonstrates how important it was that the male knowledge of how to harvest the crop was shared with Rebecca who was unable to finish the task until her husband was well enough to explain the process to her. This sexual division of labor was embedded in a system which also took advantage of hired help. Most families paid wages to people to help lighten the burden of housework for women and work in the fields for men. There was also a hierarchy of tasks in which the work done by men was valued the most, then women's work (cooking the food) and finally the kinds of less attractive work performed by servants (scrubbing floors).

In considering "The Household and the Market Economy," she points out that the ideal of self-sufficiency in pre-industrial America needs to be examined more closely. Looking to the tools that people needed to survive in the household, she points to two different widows situations and how having tools to produce goods for herself allowed the better off widow to stay out of the market and achieve greater efficiency through home production of goods. The wealthiest of all in a community, it this case a revolutionary war general upon his passing had a full accoutrement of tools to produce many household goods at home. Because he was least dependent upon market forces, the general came closest to achieving the ideal of autonomy from the vicissitudes of the market.

"The Invention of Housework: The Early Stages of Industrialization" starts with a recounting of all the ways in which industrialization would seem to have had a liberating effect on women. With the advent of gas powered light, there was no need for candle making; with the purchase of cotton cloth, there was no need to make homespun anymore; when you could get preserved milk in a can, there was less pressure to milk your own cow. By looking at the writings of women of the period, oddly enough they seem to be worse off, more overworked and frequently of worse health. By looking at the ways in which the processes that attended household labor as well as the system of technology which they were embedded, she can explain this apparent paradox. Returning to the one pot stew of the colonial New England family, she notes that the one ingredient in the stew that changed with industrialization was the flower, industrialization brought processed white flour into the homes of New England.

Examining "Milling Flour and Making Bread," she explains that the shift away from international flour trade after the Napoleonic Wars ended in Europe caused an oversupply of processed white flour, producers looked to domestic markets to sell the white flour. The growth of canals (Erie 1825 for example) made it less profitable for the New England farmer to grow grain, so people started to buy the processed white flower grown on the frontier. Next she explains that this change in the larger technical system meant that man were freed from the formerly odious and laborious chore of grinding grain. But the advent of white flour meant the opposite for women. The simple unleavened breads made with whole grain flower had put far less burden on women than did the new leavened white breads, pastries and cakes. White bread became connected with status. Only negroes, indians and the Irish ate the coarse breads now that all had formerly eaten.

Another set of innovations, leading to "The Evolution of the Stove" also had the same effect on the balance of household labor -- it shifted the balance decidedly in the female direction. The changes in iron production and the rise of coal and coke for fueling the forges that created the iron allowed for a more efficient manufacture of iron cook stoves. The innovations of Jordan Mott made the manufacture of cast iron cook stoves which used the cleaner anthracite coal. Thus emerged an industry that provided the market with the first consumer durable goods. The impact of this technical systems change was the lessening of male labor, since felling trees and chopping wood for fuel was no longer necessary. The effect on the process of cooking was that it became more complicated and complex. By the time of the Civil War, the cast iron cook stove had replaced the open hearth and women were producing ever more elaborate meals from recipes in the new cookbooks in the stores. And least we forget, the stove needed to be cleaned -- a job that fell to women as well.

The overall impact of industrialization was "More Chores for Women, Fewer for Men." As men were freed from the labors needed for tasks like milling grain and cutting wood, they increasingly worked for wages that allowed them to buy things like processed flour and cast iron cook stoves. Men therefore were less available to teach their sons the techniques of household work, and this male household work died out. At the same time women became even more tied to the domestic sphere in material terns as well as ideological. The advent of manufactured cotton cloth mean a greater demand for more varied clothes, and these clothes had to be cleaned more often as well. While early in the century, women might employ the help of a seamstress to produce clothes the advent of the home sewing machine meant that this burden fell largely on the wife and mother. Thus we see the material conditions that went hand in hand with the woman's sphere.

Fraser Sherman says

The argument that women entered the workforce because modern technology freed them housework has been around at least 40 years. Cowan covers the counter argument, that (as the title says), tech makes women

work harder. For pioneer families, "bread" usually meant flat breads, griddle cakes or other quick breads. When commercialy milled white flour became widely available, that meant yeast breads and later cakes, which required more work. 20th century medicine reduced the time required to care for sick kids, but the standards for child care (breast feed! Cook nutritious meals! Keep your house sanitary!) went up so again it was a zero-sum game.

Cowan looks at the impact of tech and the ways it put added demands on women (men and kids usually got their load lightened) or made it possible for women to work fulltime and still function as housewives. She also considers alternative options that didn't become as accepted as vacuum cleaners and washing machines did (hiring household help, professional day care, professional laundries). 4.5 stars.
