

Domestic Labor in Popular American TV Shows

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Though forms of domestic labor were often gendered in the preindustrial home, the idea of women belonging in the domestic space did not come about until the end of the 18th century, when the concepts of home and work were reimagined to be distinct and separate spaces. With the birth of industrialization came a differentiation between paid wage work and unpaid domestic labor, hence the notion of “housework” was born. Following the widespread adoption of the television in American households, networks in the 1950s began to make targeted efforts to secure the attention of the assumed primary consumer: the housewife. Networks implemented programming that was aimed at improving domestic efficiency, as it was believed that this kind of content would appeal to homemakers, and thus increase female consumption. This relationship between 20th-century television programming and gendered homemaking has been explored extensively by Humphreys (2016).

Domestic comedies of the 1950s portrayed the ideal American family. They privileged middle-class, White, suburban families, and thus representations of domestic labor were reflective of the kinds of housework performed by middle-class White housewives. The ideal domestic woman can be seen in shows such as *The Donna Reed Show* (1958–1966), *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960), and *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963), which present wives and mothers performing domesticity in ways that serve the patriarch of the family, embodying selflessness and subservience. For example, the mother of *Leave it to Beaver*, June Cleaver, is the picture of domesticity, with her small waist and modest yet appealing clothing, complete with a pearl necklace and high-heeled shoes that are worn even when cleaning the house. June’s work started early in the morning, when she rose to make coffee for her husband, and breakfast and lunch for her children.

Television in the 1950s portrayed mothers as sexually attractive, and housework was presented as a desirable activity for women to participate in. Shows therefore generally avoided presenting such work as particularly strenuous or unpleasant. This is important given the postwar setting, where many women had recently returned to the domestic setting of suburban homemaker after spending years in the skilled labor workforce. Some shows, such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957), presented homemakers who were not necessarily subversive, but certainly reflected the idea that unpaid domestic labor was not an entirely fulfilling occupation for many women. Lucy’s boredom with the everyday routine of housework, and her desire to pursue fame and fortune, were much-needed alternatives to the dominant image of the housewife in early television,

The International Encyclopedia of Gender, Media, and Communication. Karen Ross (Editor-in-Chief), Ingrid Bachmann, Valentina Cardo, Sujata Moorti, and Marco Scarcelli (Associate Editors).

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DOI: 10.1002/9781119429128.iegmc145

however, the dysfunction that her schemes often created in her family could be argued to reinforce the notion that women were better off playing the role of submissive housewife. Additionally, critics have argued that her entry into motherhood in many ways reinforced the status quo of the post-America 1950s family unit (Feasey, 2012; Kutulas, 1998).

The second wave of feminism in the late 1960s forwarded the idea that women were oppressed in many ways stemming from their primary roles as homemakers and mothers. While some feminist theorists have criticized early soap operas for their presentation of the woman in the domestic setting and their tendency to link the role of women to motherhood (Modleski, 1979), others have praised many soap operas for centering stories on women in the domestic sphere, giving them power and control in ways that were not afforded in other settings in popular media (Brown, 1990). The 1970s, following the rise of second-wave feminism and the sexual revolution of the 1960s, brought with it a variety of female characters who challenged gendered notions of maternal femininity and frequently played key narrative roles in sitcom television. In this new era of sitcoms, the domestic responsibilities of parents (particularly mothers) began to shift, with new types of families being represented. Single mothers living alone or with other single mothers, as well as working mothers with housekeepers performing the majority of the household duties, were increasingly common. Indeed, television in the 1970s often created dramatic tension and offered social commentary by comparing independent career women without children to their more traditional mothers.

As the baby boomer generation came to age in the 1970s, television networks began to cater to the advertising potential of this lucrative audience. Television shows were adapted to meet the interests of this generation: namely, topics such as the Vietnam war, the sexual revolution, and the various political movements of the late 1960s and 1970s. Shows like *Laverne & Shirley* (1976–1983) and *All in the Family* (1971–1979) presented women who were independent and made their own decisions, frequently questioning the authority of their older and/or masculine counterparts.

By the mid-1980s, the mother figure in the domestic comedy had shifted from the demure and feminine housewife to a more dominant figure who was less likely to be satisfied with the situation of her household. Over time, women in domestic comedies were increasingly likely to pursue work outside of the home, securing professional and managerial roles rather than assistant. The 1980s introduced shows like *Roseanne* (1988–2018) and *The Cosby Show* (1984–1992) both featuring professional wives who dominated the household. However, the rise in power of the sitcom wife also brought with it a tendency to present women as the overbearing and nagging authoritarian figure who ruined fun for the rest of the household.

Shows like *Roseanne* were especially significant, given that working-class families were significantly underrepresented in domestic comedies; indeed, the less normative representation of gender and class roles in *Roseanne* has made it the subject of a number of research studies (see Bettie, 1995; Lee, 1992; Rowe, 1990; Senzani, 2010). However, though characters like Roseanne were working-class mothers who worked as well as their husbands and in many ways subverted gendered expectations of female domesticity, the domestic labor of Roseanne's household was still traditionally

gendered: Roseanne cleaned the home and raised the children, while her husband did more manual work, such as home repairs. Roseanne might complain about her domestic duties in a way unlike the subservient housewives of the 1950s, but she still performed them.

As families increasingly moved away from a sole-breadwinner model where the father was essential for economic stability, television sitcoms increasingly presented the patriarch as a bumbling fool, distinct from the wise, father-knows-best figure of earlier decades. Even shows like *The Simpsons* (1989–present), which satirize the mythology of the ideal American nuclear family, ultimately still work to uphold the role of the feminine homemaker in the domestic space. While the patriarch, Homer, is frequently presented as incompetent, his wife Marge rarely fails in her role as feminine and maternal homemaker. Marge's infrequent mistakes are quickly resolved, and her many varied experiments pursuing work outside of the home always result in her quitting her job and returning to the sole role of homemaker by the end of the episode. Additionally, whenever Homer is tasked with the job of temporarily taking over Marge's domestic responsibilities, he inevitably messes it up in humorous ways, reinforcing the idea that Marge, as the feminine head of the household, should always be left responsible for domestic work.

As the 20th century came to a close, popular media made greater efforts to present women rejecting domestic labor. However, such depictions frequently focused on wealthy, upper-middle class women who pursued glamorous careers and spent their incomes on luxury items, such as designer shoes. Such representations forget or ignore the fact that women of lower socioeconomic backgrounds have historically always needed to work to support themselves and their families. Ensemble casts such as *Friends* (1994–2004) tend to show a greater variety in gendered representation, with women ranging from obsessed with domestic work and hyper-maternal (Monica) to relying exclusively on hired help to raise children and take care of the household (Rachel's mother). Similarly, though the men on *Friends* often rely on the women for emotional and domestic labor (with the women frequently caring for and feeding them), Ross demonstrates the most knowledge of parenting (due to fathering a child with his ex-wife) and insists that he is not only capable of caring for his second baby (including feeding, changing, and bathing her) but wants to.

In the 21st century, domestic sitcoms have moved even further away from the nuclear family. Television shows in the 1990s and early 2000s such as *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (2003–2007), *Ellen* (1994–1998), and *Will & Grace* (1998–present), introduced homosexuality into the domestic setting for mainstream audiences. More recently, shows such as *Modern Family* (2009–present) can be argued to embody a notion of “homodomesticity,” a phrase Doran adapts from photographer Chad Houle's 2009 exhibition, *Homodomestic* (Doran, 2013). Homodomesticity refers to the tendency of popular media to make homosexuality tolerable to mainstream audiences by presenting gay couples in heteronormative ways, thus minimizing any aspects of their lives that may be perceived as threatening to (assumed) heterosexual audiences.

In many ways, *Modern Family* challenges the traditional family unit previously depicted in popular media; in addition to its nuclear family, it also features a gay couple (Cam and Mitch) with an adopted child from Vietnam, and an older man with

a significantly younger Columbian second wife, child, and stepchild. Though Cam and Mitch challenge many elements of the traditional family by being two gay parents with an adoptive daughter, they also reinforce the hegemonic family structure. Mitch is the breadwinner for the family, working as a lawyer, while Cam is the stay-at-home dad. Cam and Mitch are a key example of homodomesticity: they uphold traditionally gendered roles, a gendered division of domestic labor, monogamy, and a desire to raise children. Similarly, the two wives of the *Modern Family*'s three primary households are stay-at-home mothers, performing domestic duties and providing the primary nurturing for their children (though their husbands clearly care for the children, they are repeatedly shown to be less capable parents). In each family of *Modern Family*, the masculine figurehead provides financial responsibility while the feminine figurehead keeps the home and raises the children. Though single episodes might disrupt this power dynamic, each family ultimately returns to their hegemonic roles.

Makeover and renovation shows further employ homodomesticity through the use of stylists who are often gay, making over the homes and/or appearances of heterosexual guests to support heteronormative coupling. *Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* might be the quintessential example of this, with its name literally signaling the labor the homosexual cast put into supporting the romantic efforts of heterosexual men. Though the existence of gay men in traditionally heterosexual domestic spaces challenges heteronormative assumptions, such shows also sanitize the sexuality of gay men to make them palatable to mainstream audiences.

SEE ALSO: Gay Male Characters on TV; Masculinities and American TV; Programming Television for Women in the USA and Canada; TV Representations of Mothers; Women in British TV Comedy

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