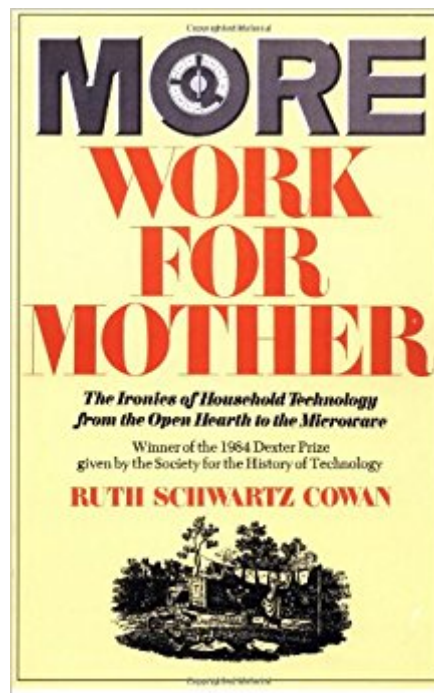




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# More Work For Mother: The Ironies Of Household Technology From The Open Hearth To The Microwave



## Synopsis

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.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Why is it that "a man works from sun to sun but a woman's work is never done?" It hasn't always been this way, and Ruth Cowan's meticulously researched and engagingly readable book shows the transformation. *More Work for Mother* describes the change not as a capitalist or patriarchal conspiracy, but rather as a series of small steps away from the traditional farming family, with its gender-specific but equally time-consuming tasks, toward completely "separate spheres" for the sexes and households as units of consumption rather than production. Inventions such as washing machines, cotton cloth, and even white flour acted as catalysts by giving the less well-off a chance at the comforts the prosperous already possessed, but in general it was men and children whose chores were relieved by these innovations. Needing money to buy the things they could not produce, men left farming to become wage-earners, while children went to school, leaving Mother at

home alone with "labor-saving" devices, no help, and raised expectations for yeast bread and clean clothes. Unfortunately, women's roles did not change as dramatically as the inventions, and our current housework rules and habits have their basis in issues of personal control more appropriate to times long gone. Even today, despite a grand array of high-tech gizmos, women still spend as much time on home maintenance as they did eighty years ago. We can't go back to our agricultural past, even if we'd like to, but historian Ruth Cowan shows us new ways to envision and direct our future. -- For great reviews of books for girls, check out Let's Hear It for the Girls: 375 Great Books for Readers 2-14. -- From 500 Great Books by Women; review by Jane Keefer

This book has a dual focus. As its title is meant to suggest, it is a history not just of housework but also of the tools with which that work is done: household technology. Human beings are tool-using animals; indeed, some anthropologists believe that, along with speech,, the ability to use and to refine our tools is precisely what sets us apart from other species of primates.

This is a fairly quick and informative read. I noted the underlying political agenda but it didn't overwhelm the book. It provides some interesting details about the daily lives of our forbearers. In particular, I enjoyed the chapter about the technological innovations that didn't catch on, for whatever reason. Good value

I particularly like the analysis of the interaction between social, economic and technological factors. I wanted to re-read and refer to the chapter on refrigeration, which demonstrated how market concentration meant the less efficient compression fridge came to dominate the market over more efficient absorption re Fridgerators.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book which provides a lot of insight into why modern women still are spending an amazing number of hours doing housework, in spite of vacuum cleaners, washing machines, dryers, and dishwashers.

This book is great for a History Class on Technology, but the problem I see with it is that it seems to be jaded a bit by the writer. There is a counter position put out by Mr. Mokyr of Northwestern University.

I had sort of avoided this book because if its title--it sounded like it was going to be one of those

books about how since Year One women have been shamelessly victimized by the evil patriarchy. Boy, was I wrong! The book is a masterpiece of American social, cultural, and technological history. In a clear and sympathetic manner, it shows how home maintenance and upkeep have gradually changed in the U.S. over time. During colonial/pioneer days, everybody in a family had essential work to do: men chopped wood, plowed, and harvested; children carried wood and water; women spun, sewed, and cooked. If anybody fell down on the job, all suffered. Gradually, things changed--men (and sometimes children) increasingly left the house to work for wages during the day. Superficially, this makes it look like, over time, American households quit being net producers of goods (grain, milk, eggs, cloth, etc.) to net consumers of finished products (pre-made clothes, canned goods, etc.). Cowan shows that this is not exactly the case. While "hard" goods did cease to be produced at home, services--health care, cooking, cleaning, etc.--were still produced for family use. And these services, in spite of introduction of labor-saving appliances and tools--still, to this day, require both time and skill to use. In fact, while much of the drudgery (heavy lifting and water hauling, for example) was reduced, the complexity of the duties actually increased. Cowan writes in a very clear style, and provides excellent examples to make her points. For example, she shows how diets changed with time, and gives a number of examples of "failed alternatives" to private housework (co-operatives, residential hotels, etc.). Ultimately, she shows how housework/way of life evolved to the present day--working mothers, self-serve stores, few home deliveries--with the tacit consent of both the men and the women who created our current society. It provides an insightful study of many aspects of American life, addressing including such questions as "If I have so many labor- and time-saving devices, why am I so busy and tired so much of the time?"

I love books that challenge conventional wisdom, such a book is "More Work for Mother." The assumptions it challenges are many, but the major two are that separate spheres of work have always been the norm, and that industrialization left nothing for women to do at home. As a mother myself, I was gratified to see historical and statistical confirmation for what I suspected all along: that the household technologies that enable us to live more sanitary and comfortable lives have not necessarily made our lives less difficult or less laborious. As Cowan points out, industrialization decreased the labor involved mostly in the work that was traditionally performed by men and children. Prior to industrialization it took an entire family working together to make a meal: children drew the water, men obtained the fuel and prepared the grain, and women cooked the meals. After industrialization, water was brought to the home by pipes, coal and prepared grain were purchased

(by women--now an extra task), but women still prepared the meals--often more complex and labor-intensive meals because expectations were raised by the greater variety of foodstuffs available and the new cookstoves. At the same time, the family no longer worked together quite as much and a lot of the "togetherness" was lost. The father became less central to child-rearing because he was no longer available in the home all day long, thus more familial responsibilities were also laid on women's plates. I highly recommend this book to women who find their days exhausting but can't figure out why.

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