

“Sorry, Not My Department”

The truth about household jobs and gender.

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At some point in my marriage -- not exactly sure when or why really -- I became the designated spider killer. And fly swatter. And roach squasher. In fact, if any insect makes the unfortunate decision to wander into our home, it's my responsibility to promptly terminate it. My wife, Diana, will stand in the kitchen inches away from a bug, and still call me from across the house to come deal with it. Is it annoying? Sometimes. But, then again, she has her own responsibilities, like shopping for the insect repellent and flyswatter



The Sad Truth

She also does most of the cooking, but I take out the trash. She puts the baby down to sleep, but I built the crib. She brings the plants home from

the nursery and I stick them in the ground. We work full time, live in a big city, and consider ourselves progressive -- yet the household chores we choose seem like something out of Father Knows Best. I talked to my friends about this and discovered that our situation is very common: Married couples tend to define their roles along gender lines.

The Real Reason

In the beginning, when first dating, couples generally do everything together: shop, cook, clean, and walk the dog. But shortly after saying our vows -- or even before that -- we fall into more familiar, even stereotypical, roles. “Part of this has to do with our role models -- our parents,” explains Samara Fabrick, LCSW, a couple’s therapist in Beverly Hills. “But another part has to do with practicality. We naturally gravitate toward things we’re good at.” For example, my wife is a professional chef -- so is it any mystery that she makes dinners most nights? I, on the other hand, am a professional geek. If a printer runs out of ink, I’m the replacer; and if a TV show needs to be recorded, I’m the TiVo king.

The Game Plan

Splitting tasks along gender lines isn’t necessarily bad thing, as long as one spouse doesn’t resent the other for it. It’s one thing for my wife to feed the cat, but if she also gives it a flea bath and cleans out the litter box while I sit on the couch zoning out with *SportsCenter*, I’m going to hear about it for weeks.

To help prevent *War of the Worlds II*, Fabrick has a concept she calls sweat equity. “You don’t both have to do the same chores, but you both have to sweat equally,” she says. She suggests sitting down and figuring out what your strengths are, who does what, and then divvying up the tasks fairly.

The Ground Rules

One rule is to be flexible. Sometimes you just might have to step in and fold the laundry even if you suck at it (note to self). And two is to be nice. If your husband is delegated to, say, clean the bathroom, then absolutely no hovering or backseat driver-driving about how you would use Clorox and not Comet. (Not like I’m speaking from experience or anything.)