

All the Single Mothers

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A new study shows that single moms spend less time on housework and more time on leisure and sleeping compared to married moms. As a single mom, I'm not surprised.

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Today, one-third of the children in the United States are living with a unmarried parent, up from 15 percent in 1968. Generally, this development is viewed as a societal turn for the worse. Single mothers are stereotyped as harried, lonely, and miserable, too burdened by solitary drudgery to have much of a life.

But not according to a new study, titled “Marital Status and Mothers’ Time Use,” by sociologists Joanna Pepin, Liana Sayer, and Lynne Casper, whose research was funded by the Eunice Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development. They looked at data collected on more than 23,000 mothers—married, separated, divorced, widowed, or otherwise unpartnered—between the ages of 18–54 living with children under the age of 13. They calculated the amount of time they spent on “housework, childcare, sleep, and leisure.”

Here is what they found: Single mothers have more free time, spend fewer hours on housework, and sleep more than married mothers.

Count me in as a single mom who is not at all surprised.

Divorce, as it turns out, can bring freedom not only from a broken relationship but from the day-to-day grind that is the performance of motherdom. There is no need to be seen as constantly cooking, bathing, doing laundry, and cleaning up when no one is watching.

There’s also less need to spend a bunch of time nagging—not the kids, but their dad.

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How many women feel that the man they married self-advertised as a progressive partner only to be pretty darn retrograde when it came to divvying up labor once the kids came along? How many women feel that rather than pester their spouse and end up, at best, with a task half-done or done badly, they should just go ahead and arrange the play date/schedule the doctor’s appointment/make the lasagna themselves? How many of these women, like their husbands, also work full-time?

Pepin and her colleagues write, “Transitions into parenthood among married couples increase mothers’ household and care work and reduce fathers’ household work, even among couples with egalitarian patterns before the birth of a child.”

Why is this? According to the study, a major factor is the stubbornly “gendered” nature of heterosexual marriage “that ratchets up the demand for housework and childcare” performed by women, even when both husband and wife work similar hours for similar pay.

Single mothers, on the other hand, have no need or even opportunity to “perform gender” by demonstrating obeisance to centuries-old conceit that good mothers prioritize everyone else but themselves. There’s not much point in putting on a play if there’s no audience.

Could it actually be that single mothers are living more fulfilling lives than they would if they were married? In my experience, yes. I’ve always thought that my experience came with an

asterisk: I have a graduate degree and a job that pays enough to support my family. Most importantly, my children have a loving and involved father who has them 50 percent of the time and regularly accommodates my requests to switch days and weekends. I spend considerable time not-parenting, which allows me to recharge. Many women are not so fortunate—not when it comes to education, employment, time off, or their co-parent.

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So it surprised me that the findings in the study held true regardless of income and race. We know the statistics: Single mothers are far more likely to be poor, underemployed, and nonwhite. Many left relationships with men who no longer contribute financially to the children.

But even *these* women spent less time on household chores and more time sleeping and playing than their married counterparts. This is explained in part by the fact that many single mothers live with a parent, relative, or other adult. As the authors write: “[I]t is not just an additional pair of hands that is important; to whom those hands belong also matters.” It turns out that when the person helping is not a husband, the mother is more able to divide labor without feeling the pressure of “performing gender” as in marriage.

So here’s to putting a new face on single motherhood. I think of it like a dry vodka martini. I wouldn’t have picked it but found it unexpectedly delicious. When people ask me if I plan to get married again or even live with someone else, my response is very direct—hell no.