

FOR WOMEN... IT'S THE MOST STRESSFUL TIME OF THE YEAR



A woman shops in Toronto during the 2012 Christmas season. Women often end up doing more than their fair share of the holiday preparations, Brigid Schulte writes. (Mark Blinch/Reuters)

By **Brigid Schulte**

For years, my sister and I have had a long talk on the phone on Christmas Eve. At 2 a.m., while frantically wrapping the last of the presents. This, of course, comes after we've shopped, decorated, addressed teetering stacks of Christmas cards and generally fried ourselves trying to create that holiday magic.

And our husbands? They're sound asleep at that time — a fact we usually note between clenched teeth. Before hanging up, we exchange our own holiday wish: “Merry Stressmas.”

It's supposed to be the most wonderful time of the year. But for women, it can also be the most overwhelming. [A survey](#) by the American Psychological Association found that more women than men feel stressed at Christmas — and have a harder time relaxing and enjoying the season. Which defeats the whole point, really.

Despite making advances in education, shattering glass ceilings in the workforce and in politics, and gaining more economic independence in the past 40 years, women, on average, still do twice as much housework and child care as men, even when they work full-time outside the home. This “second shift” of housework and child care, which sociologist Arlie Hochschild first described in the 1980s, is alive and well in the 21st century. And holidays such as Christmas send that unequal division of labor into overdrive, creating a “third shift.”

Take my friend Liz. In the weeks after Thanksgiving, once she gets home from her job as a government worker, she spends her evenings prepping for Christmas: She bakes nine kinds of cookies. She hand-rolls 300 chocolate truffles. She writes thoughtful notes on 250 Christmas cards. She decorates the house. She helps cook meals for a local mission. She entertains. She makes bows to put on her parents’ graves at Arlington National Cemetery. And this is after she’s shopped for, wrapped and shipped more than two dozen presents for her and her husband’s extended families.

To be fair, her husband, Fred, is busy too, continuing to do all the other things that need to get done: supervising homework, driving kids, cleaning toilets and the like. But he isn’t seized with the same Christmas compulsion that she feels.

Liz bakes cookies for the holidays and makes ice cream every year because that’s what her mother did. She bakes bread for the Christmas feast with the same Crisco-stained recipe her grandmother used. She hides a pickle ornament deep in the tree for her son, Charlie, to find, because that’s what she did as a kid, as did generations of her family before her.

“I really enjoy it. But Fred has no expectation that I do this stuff, nor does Charlie,” Liz said. “I would say that 50 percent of the work I do around Christmas is self-imposed.”

So why does she do it? Leslie Bella, author of [“The Christmas Imperative: Leisure, Family and Women’s Work”](#), says women feel compelled to create rituals and follow traditions, especially around Christmas, because of a need for what she calls “family-making.”

Sharing a special meal, hiding a pickle ornament in the Christmas tree — “they’re all rituals to demonstrate that we care for one another, and that this caring has permanence, history and a pattern that will persist,” said Bella, an honorary research professor at Memorial University in Newfoundland, Canada. “It shows that we are all bound together.” And for millennia, women have been the ones responsible for family-making.

But now, women make up half the workforce, many of them logging extreme hours. And though time studies show that men today clearly do more around the house than in the 1960s, women are still [carrying a heavier load](#): While men spend more time than women at paid jobs, married mothers spend six more hours a week caring for children and eight more hours a week on chores than married fathers.

So there’s simply no time for women to take on the third shift anymore.

But just look at the December issues of *Good Housekeeping* and *Better Homes and Gardens* in any grocery store check-out line, with calm and perfectly coiffed women showing off their Nutter Butter reindeer or hand-crafted gumdrop wreaths. Or the [Wal-](#)

[Mart ads](#) that proclaim: “Mom, you own this season.” Women’s magazines and blogs even publish Christmas checklists with to-do items that begin in January — buy next year’s ornaments and cards on sale — and continue throughout the year, with reminders to plant amaryllis bulbs in October for holiday blooming, make a freezer inventory in November and begin a holiday journal in December. In contrast, the only mentions of Christmas in the December GQ and Men’s Journal concern gifts to buy for her — black Agent Provocateur lingerie — and the best Gear of the Year for him.

The message may not be as blatant as a TV [ad](#) that ran in Britain last year showing a young Mum single-handedly doing everything for Christmas; the spot drew hundreds of complaints that it was sexist. But the sentiment is the same: We expect Christmas to be more magical than ever — and Mom is the one responsible for creating that magic.

And that winds up straining women and men. Family therapist B. Janet Hibbs, the author of [“Try to See It My Way: Being Fair in Love and Marriage”](#), says her office is full of stressed-out, angry couples who feel unhappy and misunderstood during the holiday season. “I hear women say: ‘You don’t understand, I don’t really have a choice. I have to do this,’” Hibbs said. They’re overwhelmed not only doing too much but trying to keep mental track of it all. And men are defensive that they’re blamed for not doing enough or doing it poorly.

“Couples get stuck,” Hibbs said. “Often, they haven’t taken the time to evaluate whether they want to continue these traditions, whether they work for them and their family anymore, or if they ever worked for anyone.”

And that, I discovered at a recent conference in Boston, is the key to moving beyond the anger and exhaustion of the third shift and finding the joy of the season again. The conference, hosted by the nonprofit ThirdPath Institute, was dedicated to teaching couples to rethink how they live, work and do their own family-making. Through the years, Marc and Amy Vachon and Bryan and Lisa Levey have worked reduced hours and flexible schedules — something that mothers tend to do far more often than fathers — to try to equitably share the breadwinning and child care. Both couples have had to negotiate how much housework is enough, and who is responsible for doing what, so that neither spouse feels put out or put upon. Still, even for these couples, the holidays are tough. Early on, both families found themselves slipping into traditional gender roles.

So now, each couple begins the season with what they call an “honest conversation”: If the point of the holidays is “family-making,” they said, then they have to talk about what kind of family they want to make — and how the holiday could help. Which traditions are meaningful? And which become a frenzied blur of forced goodwill? How many Christmas cards to send, if any? And most important: When do these tasks need to get done, and how could they share them fairly?

“The world is telling Amy that all of this is her responsibility, and we’re saying it’s a family responsibility,” Marc Vachon said. “We’ve worked to get on the same page about what’s important to us, to set our own family standards, and then we act like a team. So I don’t have to watch Amy bumping around the house, stomping her feet and resenting me.”

The Leveys have a code phrase for fighting the idea that Mom must make Christmas magic: “We call it ‘hunting the buffalo,’” Lisa said. “Am I just doing something that’s making me miserable because I think I’m supposed to? . . . Do I really want to decorate the whole outside of the house? Or are we just hunting the buffalo?”

Over the years, I’ve hunted a lot of buffalo. My husband did a lot to prepare for the holidays, but he never felt responsible for everything, as I did, nor as irresistibly driven to build gingerbread houses with the kids, take them to see every miniature train display in the Washington area, drive all over to buy boatloads of gifts and haul a 3-month-old baby to see the Nutcracker.

Yeah, I know.

So this year, my husband, Tom, and I sat around the dinner table with our two kids in early December and had our own honest conversation. What kind of Christmas did we want to have? What was most important to each of us? We ended up with a much shorter list. We divided it up fairly. For the first time in more than 20 years, Tom and I came up with a budget and split the Christmas shopping and wrapping 50-50. We’re all planning the meals.

I’ve let some things go: After all, 15-year-old boys no longer want to make gingerbread houses; they eat the gingerbread straight out of the box. And no one liked rushing from one holiday party to another on a single night. Nor did anyone enjoy my march to Martha Stewart perfection in decorating the tree. This year, when everyone got tired, though the sides were still pretty bare, we stopped. We’ll do the Christmas cards together, but they may arrive in January.

Feeling that I’m no longer the only one responsible for making Christmas magic — and that we can decide for ourselves what’s good enough — has freed up space in my head and my day. Instead of barking at the kids, then instantly regretting it, I’ve found myself laughing more. I’ve enjoyed a Christmas concert again and even read by the fire.

This Christmas Eve, I still plan to talk to my sister. But at 2 a.m., I’m hoping, like the rest of my family, to be snug in my bed, fast asleep.

brigid.schulte@washpost.com

Brigid Schulte is a Washington Post staff writer. Her book “Overwhelmed: Work, Love, and Play When No One Has the Time” comes out in March.