

4 Jobs Women Are Expected to Do without Pay, and How to Balance the Labor Scale

Rachel Asproth

A viral tweet from this past October playfully asserted, “women talk to men using their customer service voice and don’t even get paid for it.”¹ The tweet was obviously meant in jest, a comical dramatization of how women interact with (and placate) men. Still, it highlighted a very real truth: women are expected to perform unpaid work for others—especially men.

One of the most obvious reasons that women regularly perform unpaid work is patriarchy. In men, patriarchy fosters a sense of entitlement to women’s time, energy, and labor and in women, a conditioned willingness to compromise boundaries and grant men whatever they desire. Where history has consistently nodded at men’s work, women’s efforts have often gone unnoticed. Further, women historically have and do perform many kinds of work that aren’t recognized as “real work.” Today, women comprise nearly half of the US labor force and yet white women still make only eighty-one cents to white men’s dollar, and the gap is even wider for all women of color.²

Some Christians still regard work outside the home as the domain of men, and women as trespassers in that space. According to a 2017 Barna study, seventy-seven percent





of Americans are comfortable with women someday comprising more than half the workforce, but just fifty-two percent of evangelicals felt similarly. Further, evangelicals demonstrate the highest discomfort with women in leadership positions such as pastor, president, and CEO of any other group and the lowest acceptance that women face obstacles in the workplace.³

Some churches and Christian organizations don't feel compelled to pay women for their work because they don't recognize women's expertise as legitimate—or they view women's contributions as extensions of husbands. Further, because some churches still hold a traditional view of gender roles, stereotypically feminine work is seen by some as women's natural responsibility and something they should gladly perform without pay. For these reasons, Christians have sometimes demeaned women and not paid or underpaid them for their work.

What does all of this have to do with us? As Christians, we are called to do justly (Micah 5:8). Paying and recognizing others for their work is just and right. Further, women are being asked to bear unreasonable burdens and we serve a God who promises “to undo the heavy burdens, to let the oppressed go free, and... break every yoke” (Isaiah 58:6). So let us undo heavy burdens today.

Why Do Women Work for Free?

Most women can think of a time when they weren't explicitly asked but still felt compelled to perform unpaid work. This expectation can be knowingly or unknowingly implied, for example, by a man's glance between the only woman in a room and an empty pot of coffee. Boardroom barista is not in her job description, but she does it anyway. Or, a woman may be asked to host a committee meeting or perhaps a Bible study. No one asked, but she knows she's expected to bake treats for the group.

Sometimes, women do unpaid labor because they know that only *they* will notice there's a gap to be bridged, a church or office floor that needs sweeping, a fridge that needs restocking. And still other times, women are blatantly asked to do a job they do not want and should not have to do without compensation. The person or body asking for their time and energy often has no plan to compensate or credit them. But women have been socialized to “pitch in.” They want to be “team players,” so they don't ask to be paid, or they do but they're told “not know, maybe someday.”

Women's unpaid labor is symptomatic of two problems: 1) men presume that women's time, energy, and labor is less valuable and not worth compensating for and 2) society



devalues women and women’s work. Now, let’s look at four jobs women do without pay and how we can balance the labor scale.

1. Chief Family Executive Officer

This is the daily job of many women, and especially overburdened and under-recognized wives and mothers. Typically, when we think of the division of household labor, we think about the actual chores men and women do. Statistically, women perform far more household chores than men. There’s also a lot of pressure on women in Christian churches and communities to singlehandedly oversee this type of “traditionally feminine” work.

However, there’s another role that women are expected to fill in both secular and Christians homes—chief family executive officer. This person is responsible for *recognizing* that work needs to be done and *ensuring* it gets done. She is supervisor of the household, not only physically doing most household chores but also organizing the home, keeping track of schedules, and predicting and meeting the family’s needs. The technical term for this burden is the “the mental load.” According to the 2017 Modern Family Index, women are two times more likely to be managing the household and three times more likely to be managing their children’s schedules.⁴

Many women aren’t even *asked* to do it, they simply do. Whether because women have been performing this

supervisory work for so long and believe it is expected or because men believe women are supposed to do it, men have often been excused from their share of the mental load. They don’t need to think about what they’ll need for a day at the park, because women will. They don’t need to plan a meal when parents come to town, because women will. They don’t need to think about a color-coded calendar, because women will.

But the burden of running a household shouldn’t fall to women alone. A household is a shared responsibility, a promise to work, build, and plan together. Men aren’t exempt from that. Further, research indicates that marriages and families are healthier and happier when couples share domestic work.⁵ With just a few simple practices, men could ensure that women are not only celebrated for their hard work, but also that they equally share the mental load of a household with their wives. To balance the labor scale:

- A. When your spouse plans, schedules, or simply announces a need she’s noticed in your home, let her know you appreciate her attention to detail and ask what can you do to share equally in the work.
- B. Spend a few minutes each day thinking about the needs of your home. Each week, notice and make a list of tasks that need doing or events that need planning. Communicate to your spouse that you’re on it.

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C. Apologize when you don't pull your weight. If your wife has been carrying more of the load, let her know that you know it's not okay or sustainable. Make a plan for how you're going to pull your weight. Ask your wife how you can be a better partner.

2. Public Educator/Free Consultant

The expertise of women is often judged valuable enough to make use of but not valuable enough to compensate for. This happens in many fields. Women who work as paid educators and consultants are routinely asked to work for free as either a public service or favor. They are invited to weigh in on an organization's problems with racial diversity or difficulty finding women for leadership positions. In one study, women lawyers said that the committee work they are typically assigned is not seen as labor that should be compensated.⁶ But no matter the field, requests for free education/consulting indicate a disrespect for women's expertise, time, and energy.

This also happens in churches. They want to benefit from women's gifts without recognizing women themselves, without giving them titles, and without paying them. This phenomenon is epitomized in the unofficial position of "pastor's wife." She may perform domestic work for the congregation at large, offer emotional support and pastoral care to others, and even assist her husband in crafting sermons and shaping church vision. But for all of this work, she still holds no official title but one that extends from her husband's position. Church leader Kay Bonikowsky put it this way:

[My husband's] official position [as elder] lent credibility to my unofficial one. How could I now justify all the roles I'd filled before? I wasn't a pastor, although I counseled in the place of one. I wasn't a deacon, although I served in every function required of a deacon. I wasn't an elder, although my advice was sought at every level.⁷

In other cases, women professionals may be asked to volunteer or "unofficially consult" on an issue/project for the church. Their labor is often solicited carefully, strategically. But they know that "would love your insight on this" doesn't mean "would love to pay your regular professional fee." Instead, it means "would love to benefit from your expertise at no cost" or "would love for you to volunteer to perform work that we would *pay* a man to do." As Bonikowsky explains it:



Something shifts when a woman asks that her work and calling be formally recognized in these spaces. The leadership and direction she previously provided (often for free) and without objection... becomes unacceptable.⁸

It's not okay to ask women to volunteer their labor as a favor or public service. If we value what women do, we show it. To balance the labor scale:

A. Ask women what they charge for their expertise and happily pay it. Or let them know you're not able to and thank them for offering those services.

B. If a woman volunteers her time, let her know that you recognize she is qualified and could charge for her service. Thank her for waiving her fee. If you're able, *still* ask if she would like to be paid.

C. Don't presume that women's ingenuity and time is yours. When a woman asks you to do your research on your own, don't ask her to instead educate you herself. Do the work.

3. Community Therapist

According to a 2018 UN Report, women do more than two and a half times the amount of unpaid emotional work that men do.⁹ Women are used to listening to other people talk about their problems. We do it for people with whom we're in relationship. But we also do it for strangers—performing emotional labor at the expense of our own wellbeing, needs, and boundaries.

It's good to be kind and empathic. Scripture encourages us to make our ears attentive and to incline our hearts toward

understanding others (Proverbs 2:2). However, women are often expected to provide an unreasonable amount of understanding and emotional support. And, that level of empathy and care is rarely returned when women have their own struggles. In these situations, they are community therapists—friendly shoulders to cry on for the world-over. These aren't equal exchanges of support and understanding. No, women are serving as emotion receptacles for girlfriend problems, in-law struggles, money shortfalls, and work frustrations.

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Often, this type of unpaid therapy work is justified by gender stereotypes.¹⁰ Women are naturally better listeners. They're more empathetic. They're better communicators. They care more about others' problems. "So, why shouldn't I talk to them about my problems?" one might ask. "I always feel so good when I talk to women about my feelings. I'm not *forcing* them to listen to me. They could tell me to stop." Except many women won't tell you to stop. And you won't have to *force* them to listen to you, because it is what they have been socialized to do: to put your problems, emotions, struggles, and trauma first.

Women are expected to develop emotional competence young but men aren't always encouraged to do the same. Naturally, talking to women can be emotionally healing. It's easy to crave that positive experience without considering the corresponding costs to women. It can also be hard to think of these interactions as laborious, as work women may feel obligated to perform. It's important to ask 1) whether you take advantage of women's tendency to do disproportionate emotional labor and 2) whether you're creating reciprocal relationships in which women can share their struggles with you. To balance the labor scale:

A. Before soliciting a woman's listening ear, ask yourself if you make space for her struggles too. If not, don't ask her to perform emotional work.

B. Recognize that listening and empathizing with others is *work*. Even when your spouse is doing it, it's a gift and a service and it should not be taken for granted. Express gratitude to those who listen and love you well.

C. Be aware that women don't always feel comfortable saying, "I don't have the time/energy to talk to you." Check in with women about what they want to give and respect their boundaries. Make it safe for women to say, "I can't/don't want to talk to you about this right now."

4. Everybody's Administrative Assistant

Frustratingly, women are expected to perform menial tasks outside of their job descriptions all the time.¹¹ Research routinely shows that women are more likely than men to volunteer for "non-promotable tasks" such as office housework (cleaning, taking orders for food, answering the phone, etc.) and the gender difference only widens in groups containing both men and women.¹² Many women report fearing to perform any traditionally feminine or administrative assistant-type work because they may be expected to always do that task.



Sometimes, this kind of unpaid work is framed in a positive light, as if women are just naturally more competent at “feminine” or assistant-type tasks than men. Other times, men rely on strategic ignorance to situate certain undesired tasks as “feminine.” But women aren’t naturally better at making coffee, taking notes, or wiping a kitchen counter—and men aren’t incapable. They just haven’t been asked to do it.

Think about how you perceive others’ competencies and how you subtly—or blatantly—communicate those beliefs to others. Do women in your office tend to pick up slack in keeping the kitchen clean? Do they refill the paper towel roll when it’s empty? Do you generally assign “secretary tasks” mostly to women? To balance the labor scale:

A. Demonstrate to other men that there is no such thing as “women’s work” by doing tasks often relegated to women. Let no task be too menial or “feminine” for you and encourage the men around you to have the same attitude.

B. Vocally encourage women in your office to set boundaries and never transgress those boundaries by asking them to perform tasks men aren’t asked to do.

C. Show appreciation if a woman performs a traditionally feminine or assistant type-task, but also let her know that she is not expected to do so. Assure her that if she ever feels pressured to do that, she can come to you.

We’ve Got Work to Do

The epidemic of women’s unpaid work is a serious problem and it’s one that should concern us as Christians. Whether by implication, necessity, or demand, women aren’t being credited or compensated for their work. They are often taken less seriously as professionals and expected to take sole responsibility for housework and other traditionally feminine kinds of work. Not all labor—such as household work—is the kind of work for which we give and receive a paycheck. But it remains that for much of history, patriarchy has ensured that all of women’s work—official and unofficial and paid and unpaid—is seen as less than, and that women’s labor can be taken for granted.

We need to both pay women (equally!) for their labor and stop expecting them to perform inordinate amounts of work for free. We also need to make sure that women’s expertise and efforts are welcomed and compensated in our churches. Let’s balance the labor scale in our homes, churches, and communities and show respect for any and all work completed by women’s hands.



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