Family well being depends on the performance of the chores that create a safe, healthy, and comfortable life—putting meals on the table, caring for the children, keeping clothing and living quarters neat and clean. The organization of family care services has undergone considerable change, as the number of housewives has dwindled. When the wife has a paid job, the family has the problem of replacing the services that she as a housewife would have provided. The employed wife may continue to do most or all of the same tasks she performed as a housewife. Or the husband may take a larger share of the housework. The couple can reduce the amount they have to do themselves by lowering their standard of housekeeping, or by purchasing a larger proportion of the family care services they use.

Much depends on the choices that the family makes in organizing family care. If the wife continues to do substantially all of the chores, plus her paid work, the overload may sour life for her and the whole family. Resort to the purchase of services on a large scale may change the whole tenor of family life. Chicken soup like mother used to make may no longer be on the menu; the substitute may be better or worse.

As families wrestle with these decisions, they are forced to confront and reconcile the sometimes conflicting interests of husband and wife. How these problems are dealt with determines the fairness of the spouses’ workloads, the shape of children’s daily lives, whether wives can live lives as full, as free, and as pleasant as husbands can, the amount of friction between spouses, and the likelihood of divorce. The shape of the economy is affected. When family-produced services are replaced by purchased services, a large number of service jobs are created, many of them in small enterprises.

As wives have increased their participation in paid employment they have reduced the time they spend in housework. There has been some increase in the contribution of services by husbands. To take up part of the slack, many families have increased their purchases of services. They now
eat less home-cooked food, and some are buying child care. In many families, the daily life of a child is nothing like what it used to be, nor are the meals.

The marketplace responded to the changes in demand. Good quality frozen dinners and the microwave ovens to defrost them became available. New enterprises sprang up, offering to sell to families the services that the housewife used to perform. Fast-food restaurants selling hamburgers, chicken, and French fried potatoes, submarine sandwich shops, sushi bars, Chinese carryouts, and pizza palaces have taken the place of mother’s services for many families. So have child care centers. New products that have reduced housework hours include permanent press fabrics which don’t have to be ironed, frozen foods, and microwave ovens. The free market has filled the gap left by the departure of the full-time housewife and the unwillingness of men to take on a greater share of the housework.

The question of which spouse is to do how much housework was not a subject of discussion 50 years ago. Under a caste system that still has a great many adherents, females were held to be marked out from birth to provide family care services, while males were marked out as fully exempted from providing any. Indeed, males were considered to be disgraced if they did take part in family care. The caste system for family care appeared to be a simple matter of following biological dictates.

Up to now, and for some time into the future, biology ineluctably assigns to the wife the gestation and birthing of the family’s infants. However, it is not pure and simple biology that assigned to her the responsibility for all subsequent care of the children within the home. Alternative arrangements certainly were and are viable in biological terms. However, if she was to do all of the child minding, a great deal of that could be done simultaneously with cooking and cleaning. So the addition of the housework to the wife’s child care assignment served the purpose of economic efficiency. Concentration of responsibility for housework in a single person also led to the development of expertise and simplified the management of the home.

Until relatively recently, a high proportion of urban husbands earned all or almost all of the family’s money income, and a considerable proportion of them had a physically demanding job. So the assignment of all of the housework to the wife also served roughly to balance out the work assignments of the spouses. Even so, this traditional division of duties produced in many families a considerable disparity between the spouses in time and effort devoted to work and in time free for rest and leisure. The husband’s work activities might be restricted to business hours, or to a short agricultural season, while his wife, burdened perhaps with many children, with a disabled parent to attend to, and with primitive household equipment, might work long hours seven days a week throughout the year. In a small minority of families, where domestic servants were employed, the wife did little work of any kind. On average though, within the last 100 years in Western economies, there was probably rough justice in terms of the leisure time of both spouses. Men did monopolize the kinds of work that gave mental