If there was one time in my marriage when life felt the most unfair, it was during the witching hour. When our children were young and I was working from home, I would relieve our babysitter at 5 p.m. and start to feed and bathe our 3-year-old and 6-month-old and begin various bedtime rituals. By 6 p.m., this thought would be running through my head: If my husband doesn’t come home from the office soon to help, I’m going to lose my mind. By 7 p.m., my panic would turn to anger: Do I have to do everything? Each minute before his arrival seemed like an eternity, my task much more onerous than the pressure he was facing to make daily deadlines. Was our parenting arrangement altering my perception of time—and virtually guaranteeing that I’d be pissed off when he got home?

In a word, yes. My conviction that I carried a heavier load was validated by similar complaints from my female friends as well as scholarly books and morning TV shows, all reinforcing what has become a global notion that working women—and working mothers in particular—toil much more than their partners. But what we weren’t seeing was that there was a mounting body of evidence that women were not, in fact,
workhorse wives picking up their husbands’ slack, that there are several variables in the dual-earner equation, debts as well as credits that need to be tallied in order to take a true measure of who does more. So does that mean my sense of injustice and that of so many other women have all been the result of an accounting error? Thankfully, it’s not quite so simple. But the story of how a woman’s double (or was it triple?) duty of paid work and housework and child care turned into a foregone conclusion even while the data have been telling us otherwise does begin with some math.

When women began to enter the work force in large numbers in the 1970s, it seemed logical that one day husbands and wives would divide making money and taking care of the home in a 50-50 split. University of Chicago economist Gary Becker’s 1965 theory of the allocation of time predicted it would happen, and he won a Nobel Prize. But that goal, as all of us non-Nobelists can attest, proved elusive. Maybe we simply put too much faith in the power of structural change absent family-friendly policies or were too naive about how deeply our gender norms for who does what inside the home were ingrained. At any rate, women joining the workforce soon faced a new challenge to get their hands more with the housework. That sometimes led to fights. No—that almost always led to fights. Women who shared the load who ran the dishwasher at night and emptied it in the morning without being asked were viewed as the luckiest exceptions. Women who had partners who cleared the table but then dumped the dishes into the sink were the norm. Feminism came to be seen as “the movement that brought women more work,” as the frustrated housewife of the 1930s and ’40s became the equally frustrated wage-earning housewife of the ’70s, ’80s, ’90s and 2000s. And all the bickering about who did what escalated. In a 2007 poll conducted by the Pew Research Center, 68% of married adults said “sharing household chores” was the thirde most important ingredient (after faithfulness and sex) in a successful marriage—up from 47% in a comparable study in 1979.

So a year and a half into a new decade, it may come as a surprise to you, as it did to me, to discover that on balance, husbands and wives have never before had such similar workloads. According to data just released by the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, men and women in 2010 who were married, childless and working full time (defined by the BLS as more than 35 hours a week) had combined daily totals of paid and unpaid work—which is to say, work at the office and all the drudgery you have to do at home—that were almost exactly the same: 8 hr. 12 min. for men, 8 hr. 5 min. for women. For those who had children under the age of 18, women employed full time did just 20 min. more of combined paid and unpaid work than men did, the smallest difference ever reported. No, men were not doing the same amount of housework as women, but neither were women pulling the same number of hours at the office as men. (Husbands and wives who split everything down the line are as hard to find as the great white whale. In a 2009 analysis of results of the National Study of the Changing Workforce, Scott Hall at Ball State University found that only 9% of 830 people in dual earner couples split every job. This couple are often parents who do blue collar shift work and cannot afford and are not at liberty to be flexible in their work hours.)

What’s more, new research on working fathers indicates that they’re the ones experiencing the most pressure. In a July report called, tellingly, The New Male Mys- tique, the Families and Work Institute surveyed 2,500 fathers and concluded that long hours and increasing job demands are conflicting with more exacting parenting norms. The institute had launched the survey to follow up on its 2008 finding that 66% of fathers said they were having a hard time managing the responsibilities of work and family, compared with only 47% of mothers in dual-earner couples. “Men are feeling enormous pressure to be breadwinners and involved fathers,” says Ellen Galinsky, the institute’s director. “Women expect more of men, and men expect more of themselves.”

This report comes on the heels of a national survey of 567 fathers working at Fortune 500 companies, conducted by Boston College’s Center for Work and Family and released in June, in which 53% of respondents agreed with the statement “In the past three months, I have not been able to get everything done at home each day because of my job.” Brad Harrington, executive director of the Center for Work and Family, points out that men may be feeling particularly squeezed because they never anticipated having so much domestic responsibility. “It’s a surprise for them. They weren’t prepared that this would be expected of them, and they have no role models of how to do it,” he says.

What these new findings mean is that the widespread belief that working mothers have it the worst—a belief that engenders an enormous amount of conflict between spouses—is simply not true. And if you add it up, we are not simply putting our heads in the sand. Quantitatively speaking, we have no evidence that the widespread belief that working women have it the worst than that— and just stag 50 fewer hours of child care than stay-at-home moms—when kids are under 6.

One American sociologist, Suzanne Bianchi, professor of sociology at UCLA and is still read on college campuses, made an indelible mark with its famous finding that women—myself included—admit it and move on.

A Tale of Two Sociologists

The assumption that working women had to shoulder the brunt of the housework was traced back to the publication of Arlie Hochschild’s The Second Shift. In the 1970s, Hochschild was a sociologist with two young children who was trying to get tenure at Berkeley, when she saw her male colleagues unen- cumbered by demands at home and was in- spired to write about the working woman’s double duty. “It came from my own anguish, my own conflict,” she says. Over the course of 10 years, Hochschild interviewed 150 couples, noting at a time observing their tensions and resentments, their concessions and compromises. Part of The Second Shift’s power, aside from Hoch- child’s considerable talents as a writer, was the depth of its qualitative research. But the book, which has enjoyed a long shelf life and is still read on college campuses, made an indelible mark with its famous finding that women were running roughly 15 more hours each week than men.

Hochschild came up with that number by analyzing data collected in the 1960s, spotlighting what is now clearly the product of a culture in transition, a lag between women’s entry into the workforce and the great domestic shakeout in which working women cut back on housework, often by enlisting men for more and men reduced office hours and chipped in more at home. Yet Hochschild’s interpretation of that statis- tical blip in the 1960s came to define the plight of women in the 1990s and 2000s. The Second Shift was a crossover hit and sparked a large surge of academic writing on the inequalities of the household, or “dom- estic labor literature,” much of it devoted to trying to figure out why men were not picking up more slack.

One American sociologist, Suzanne Bianchi, who was on the sidelines of the why men aren’t doing more debate for many years. From 1978 to 1994, she was a demog- rapher and statistician at the U.S. Census Bureau working with large representa- tive samples that shed light on long term changes at the population level. Bianchi was looking at almost everything but housework—education, earnings, changes in income, the gulf between the genders in the pits of focusing only on the domes- tic sphere. “May be men really were all jerks and not doing their fair share, or maybe they were allocating their time to other

‘Maybe men really were all jerks and not doing their fair share, or maybe they were allocating their time to other things.’—SUZANNE BIANCHI, PROFESSOR OF SOCIOLOGY, UCLA

In a recent study of married couples, spending weeks at a time observing their behavior, Bianchi found that the widespread belief that working women have it the worst than that— and just stag 50 fewer hours of child care than stay-at-home moms—when kids are under 6.
In the past several decades, mothers have actually increased the amount of time spent with their kids, a feat all the more remarkable considering that paid work has meant they’re spending more and more hours at work. "Women who spend 10 more minutes a day on child-care activities with leisure activities. In never realized that one solution was staring me in the face. Don’t go home so early," says Bianchi. "As long as women pull back on paid work, they enable men not to, so it gets to be a vicious cycle," says Bianchi. "Myth of the Slacker Dad family and to the workplace, there’s a conflict between his spouse’s expectations and what he can deliver, and there’s a conflict between his own career aspirations and being an ideal parent." All those competing pressures may account for why 65% of working fathers in Harrington’s survey believed that partners should provide equal amounts of care but only 30% of fathers reported that caregiving is actually equal.

Researchers are also discovering differences in how men and women experience time, especially free time. Liana Sayer, a sociologist at Ohio State University, and Marybeth Matttingly, now at the University of New Hampshire, found that whereas in 1975 free time reduced feelings of being rushed for men and women alike, by 1996 it no longer reduced time pressure for women. Not only do women report having less free time than men now, but also the quality of that free time has worsened. "We suspect that it has to do with shifts in how women are spending their free time, which is increasingly devoted to a blend of child care and leisure activities," says Sayer, who notes that this leads to leisure being "contaminated" by less pleasurable activities or "fragmented" by interruptions—when you’re reading on the couch, say, and get called away every 15 minutes to referee a squabble or find a missing Lego piece or administer a snack. According to the University of Maryland’s time-diary studies—which, unlike the BLS’s, collected data on tasks occurring simultaneously—the women spent 25% of their child-care activities with leisure activities. By 1996, that had risen to 50%. And even the most dedicated mother would probably admit that there’s a qualitative difference between having an adults-only meal with friends and going out for pizza with those same friends and a bunch of kids. The gender inequity that persists, then, is in access to high-quality leisure time, which, for whatever reasons, men seem more able to claim—and protect from contamination—than women. The obvious cost of this leisure deficit is that women have less opportunity to relax in a way that recharges their batteries. This is a real grievance that needs to be addressed, but women also have to acknowledge all the work that men are doing and take comfort in the fact that they share these burdens. Especially in childhood, care—and should—be renegotiated over the course of a marriage, as long as both partners get as the total workloads of the sexes have been trending toward convergence. Why do we feel we’re doing so much more in life than our partners? And the older the kids get, the less time they need. Mothers of 14- and 15-year-olds spend more than a day on unpaid labor than young childless women. Free time increases too—one of which is increasing the blend of work and leisure that parents get to enjoy much, much more.

Will the notion of the working woman’s second shift ever get laid to rest? It would certainly help if men as well as women would take their feet slightly off the gas pedal of their careers when their children are very young. But the second shift has also become something of an ideology, a chicken-and-egg proposition, and has locked men and women into a perpetual stalemate. As sociologist Jann E. Lareau of the University of Pennsylvania has written, "In the past three months, I have not been able to get everything ‘done at home’ each day because of my job."

Like Betty Friedan’s unhappy housewife, today’s working dad may be suffering from gender-induced decisional anxiety, which pressures him to be both breadwinner and involved father. "There are many reasons to be concerned about men," says Elin Goldman of the Families and Work Institute, which just released a report concluding that men are facing longer hours at work and the blurring of boundaries between the office and home to be blame. That study and other new research show how much dads are feeling squeezed. Time August 8, 2011 48