

Even With More Free Time, Women Feel No Less Rushed, Study Finds

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While more free time sounds like a good thing for everyone, new research suggests it is a better deal for men than it is for women.

A study found that men who have more free time feel less rushed than men with less leisure time. But even when women have more time free from paid work and household tasks, they don't feel less rushed.

The results suggest that women – particularly mothers – may feel the pressures of childcare and housework even when they have time for relaxation, said Liana Sayer, co-author of the study and assistant professor of sociology at Ohio State University.

“The meaning of free time for men's and women's lives are quite different,” Sayer said. “Especially for wives and mothers, it appears free time is still combined with other activities or responsibilities.”

Women, in effect, pay a “family penalty,” she said.

For example, the study found that men who were married and had children didn't feel more rushed in their daily lives than single, childless men.

But the odds of feeling sometimes or always rushed were 2.2 times higher for married women with children than it was for single, childless women.

Sayer conducted the study with Marybeth Mattingly of the University of Maryland . Their results appear in the February 2006 issue of the Journal of Marriage and Family.

The researchers examined time diary data from two national surveys conducted in 1975-76 and 1998-99.

The 1975 data included 708 people from across the country interviewed by the Institute for Social Research at the University of Michigan. The 1998 data included a national sample of 1,151 people surveyed by the Survey Research Center at the University of Maryland.

In both surveys, respondents filled out a diary that showed how they spent a specific 24-hour period. Free time was measured as time not spent at paid work, household chores, child care, or self care such as eating, grooming and sleeping. Participants were also asked how often they felt rushed during a typical day – never, sometimes or always.

The results showed that time pressures increased for women between 1975 and 1998, especially in comparison to men.

In 1975, women and men had similar amounts of free time, but by 1998 a 30-minute per day gender gap had opened, with women having less leisure time than men.

“Women worked more hours in paid employment in 1998 than they did in 1975,” Sayer said. “The amount of time they spend in household labor declined during that period, but not enough to offset the increase in paid work hours.”

Men increased the amount of time they spent on childcare and housework between 1975 and 1998, but also decreased the amount of time they spent at paid work, Sayer said. The result was that their

amount of free time was unchanged.

But even women who had more free time than others didn't feel less busy, Sayer said.

Each hour of free time in 1998 reduced men's odds of feeling rushed by 8 percent – however, no such association existed among women.

Moreover, women were more likely to feel sometimes or always rushed in 1998 compared to 1975, while men's odds of feeling rushed did not change significantly over those 23 years.

In 1998, 39 percent of women said they always felt rushed – up 10 percent from 1975. In contrast, 31 percent of men said they felt always rushed in 1998, up 5 percent from 1978 – not a significant difference.

The fact that women were more likely than men to feel rushed – and were not helped by having more free time – may be related to how men and women view household responsibilities and child care, Sayer said.

While this study didn't delve into the reasons why women feel more rushed, Sayer said other research suggests women still feel more responsible for taking care of children and housework, even if men are pitching in more than they once did.

This means that the quality of free time may not be the same for women as it is for men.

“Among mothers, free time may be too entangled with caregiving to be the ‘pause that refreshes,’” Sayer said.

For example, even during their free time, women may still be more responsible than men for meeting the needs of their children.

“Its not that women don't enjoy spending free time with their children, but it is a different experience than spending time with friends,” she said. “To ease time pressure, women need more free time that is not combined with other activities or responsibilities.”

Source: Ohio State University

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