

'Fridges and washing machines liberated women': researcher

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The advent of modern appliances such as washing machines and refrigerators had a profound impact on 20th Century society, according to a new Université de Montréal study. Plug-in conveniences transformed women's lives and enabled them to enter the workforce, says Professor Emanuela Cardia, from the Department of Economics.

Within a short time-span, household technology became accessible to the majority. In the late 1910s, a refrigerator sold for \$1,600 and 26 years later such [appliances](#) could be purchased for \$170. Access to electric stoves, washing machines and vacuum cleaners was also generalized.

"These innovations changed the lives of [women](#)," says Professor Cardia. "Although it wasn't a revolution per se, the arrival of this technology in households had an important [impact](#) on the workforce and the economy."

Professor Cardia based her research on more than 3,000 censuses conducted between 1940 and 1950, from thousands of American households, across urban and rural areas. "We calculated that women who loaded their stove with coal saved 30 minutes everyday with an electric stove," says Cardia. "The result is that women flooded the workforce. In 1900, five percent of married women had jobs. In 1980, that number jumped to 51 percent."

In 1913, the vacuum cleaner became available, in 1916 it was the [washing machine](#), in 1918 it was the refrigerator, in 1947 the freezer,

and in 1973 the microwave was on the market. All of these technologies had an impact on home life, but none had a stronger impact than [running water](#).

"We often forget that running water is a century-old innovation in North America, and it is even more recent in Europe. Of all innovations, it's the one with the most important impact," says Cardia.

In 1890, 25 percent of American households had running water and eight percent had electricity. In 1950, 83 percent had running water and 94% had electricity. According to Cardia, in 1900, a woman spent 58 hours per week on household chores. In 1975, it was 18 hours.

While there have been several studies on the industrial revolution and different aspects of technology, says Cardia, very few investigations have focused on the household revolution. "Yet, women play a very important role in the economy whether they hold a job or work at home."

Source: University of Montreal ([news](#) : [web](#))

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