

Men do see the mess—they just aren't judged for it the way women are

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On a typical day, men spend [a third as much time](#) cleaning as women.

Does that make [women](#) beacons of cleanliness, while men are [genetically](#)

[unable](#) to see the messiness in their midst?

[This myth](#) is a [common explanation](#) for why men don't do as much housework as women. Men walk into a [room](#) and apparently can't see the dust bunnies gathering on the floor or the piles of laundry stacked up on the couch.

It [lets men off the hook](#) for not doing their fair share of the household cleaning.

But in a recent study we show that men aren't dirt-blind—they can see mess just as well as women. They are simply less severely penalized for not keeping their spaces neat and tidy.

Chore inequality

Despite massive gains in [education](#) and [employment](#), women still shoulder a [larger share of the housework](#) than men.

Women today spend, on average, roughly an hour and 20 minutes per day cooking, cleaning and doing laundry. About a third of that is just spent cleaning. Men, on the other hand, spend about half an hour performing these duties—and only 10 minutes scrubbing and tidying.

This household chore inequality is evident [over time](#), [across professions](#) and even when women [work longer hours](#) and [make more money](#). Even in Sweden, where government [policies](#) are strongly geared toward promoting gender equality, women [do more housework](#). Swedish women do two times as much daily housework than men even though women are much more likely [to work full-time](#) than in other countries.

Naturally, the more time spent on chores, the less a woman has to spend on other activities like [sleep, work and leisure](#).

The same mess

In our study, which was recently published in [Sociological Methods and Research](#), we asked 327 men and 295 women of various ages and backgrounds to assess a photo of a small living room and kitchen area.

By random assignment, some participants rated a photo of the room looking cluttered—dirty dishes on the counter, clothing strewn about—while others examined a much tidier version of the same room. All participants looked at the one photo they were given and then rated how messy they thought it was and how urgently it needed cleaning.

The first thing we wanted to know was whether men and women respondents rated the rooms differently. Contrary to [popular lore](#), men and women saw the same mess: They rated the [clean room](#) as equally clean and the messy room as equally messy.

Differing expectations

So if "dirt blindness" isn't to blame, why do women do more housework?

One argument is that social expectations are different for men and women. Women may be judged more harshly for having a less-than-spotless home, and women's awareness of these expectations may motivate them to do more.

We tested this idea by randomly telling participants that the photo they were looking at depicted either "John's" or "Jennifer's" living space. Then we asked them to rate Jennifer's or John's character—how responsible, hardworking, neglectful, considerate and likable they were—based on the cleanliness of their home.

We also asked participants to assess the extent to which she or he might be judged negatively by unexpected visitors—extended family, bosses and friends—and how much responsibility they believed Jennifer or John would bear for housework if they were working [full-time](#) and living alone, working full-time and married with children, or a married, stay-at-home parent.

This is where things got interesting. Participants rated the photos differently depending on whether they were told that a woman or a man lived there. Notably, respondents held higher standards of cleanliness for Jennifer than they did for John. When they were told the tidy room belonged to Jennifer, participants—regardless of gender—judged it less clean and more likely to inspire disapproving reactions from guests than when the same exact room was John's.

We've all heard 'men are lazy'

Still, we did find that both men and women pay a large penalty for having a cluttered home.

Compared to their tidier counterparts, both Jennifer and John received substantially more negative character ratings and were expected to garner much more negative judgments from visitors.

Interestingly, John's character was rated more negatively than Jennifer's for having a messy home, reflecting the common stereotype that men are lazy. Yet participants did not believe John would be any more likely than Jennifer to suffer negative judgment from visitors, which suggests that the "men are lazy" stereotype does not disadvantage them in a socially meaningful way.

Finally, people were more likely to believe that Jennifer would bear primary responsibility for cleaning, and this difference was especially

large in the hypothetical scenario in which she or he is a full-time working parent living with a spouse.

That people attribute greater responsibility for housework to women than men, even regardless of their employment situation, suggests that women get penalized more often for clutter than men do.

Judge not

People hold women to higher standards of cleanliness than men, and hold them more responsible for it.

Some women may internalize or embrace such standards. But for many, it is unlikely a love of cleaning but rather a fear of how mess will be perceived that is the real problem—and one possible reason why many women frantically clean their home before unexpected visitors arrive.

The good news is that, with enough collective willpower, old-fashioned social expectations can be changed. We could start by thinking twice before judging the state of someone's home, especially our own.

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