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Exploring Equity at Home

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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting lockdowns have forced many of us to work from home. This unprecedented event has ensured that men now spend more time at home. However, data suggests that the burden of unpaid housework and care on women has increased beyond pre-pandemic levels. This led me to the question, is equity at home a myth? Have women been able to make great strides in professional, socio-political, and economic standing but are yet to realize equity in their own homes?

Being a first-generation immigrant to Canada seeking to establish a better life, I seek to understand what equity at home can mean. I wondered if other first-generation immigrant men also longed and strived for a better, more equitable home life. Through a series of 12 in-depth interviews, I uncovered four interesting insights discussed briefly below.

Research Findings

Insight 1: Equitable partnerships are not equal. They are fair.

Equality implies each partner does exactly half of all housework. However, by no means is this always a fair distribution for most couples. Instead, partners seek equity at both the collective level and the individual level. At the collective level, responsibilities are shared, flexible, and renegotiable. Decisions at home are made through active discussion and mutual agreement. To establish equity, partners often lead with empathy and are willing to adapt in anticipation of each other's needs. Together, they strive to maintain the home's emotional health by supporting one another and enabling each to grow.

Partners also seek equity at the individual level wherein they work towards creating a safe space for each other to freely express themselves and be vulnerable. Maintaining self-identity separate from the partnership is crucial and it is often sought out through "me time". Sometimes this takes the form of pampering oneself and other times it is about taking time out to do the things they enjoy.

Insight 2: Homes are not divided on gender lines. They are pragmatic.

There is no space for traditional gender roles in equitable homes. Housework is divided on more practical considerations such as

understanding each other's strengths and weaknesses, preferences, idiosyncrasies, schedules, and time commitments.

Furthermore, many find fulfilment in completing housework. Not only does it provide a sense of achievement but often the repetitive, simple tactile nature of tasks is a therapeutic and meditative experience for some. Moreover, many partners prefer completing housework together and use this time to further strengthen their bond.

Insight 3: Equitable partnerships are not accidental. They are built over time with effort.

Building an equitable partnership at home is hard-work and requires ongoing and involved preservation. It is almost impossible to achieve without active communication, both verbal and non-verbal. With verbal communication, it is important to set expectations early to increase predictability and reliability. This can be accomplished through open, honest conversations, being curious, asking questions, active listening, and providing as well as receiving feedback.

Non-verbal communication is equally important. In particular, partners often show appreciation and care for one another through everyday actions. Here, completing housework is seen as an expression of care.

Insight 4: Other men are not men's role models. Women are.

Men tend to model their behaviours based on the women in their lives, particularly at a young age. Contrary to women, they often lack the necessary domestic male role models and are left to discover this path alone. The men who seek avenues to create equity at home frequently try to be more progressive and improve the status quo.

Opportunity

Men are co-conspirators in the movement to achieve gender equality both at home and outside. Allyship starts at home and there is an opportunity here to support men, help them address their biases, and work with them to achieve new behavioural norms. I propose the following action plan for us to get the ball rolling.

For Individuals: Pause. Reflect. Adjust.

For Organizations: Inform. Inspire.



“

A modern man is one who understands that his partner's needs are as important as his and provides space, support, and opportunity for her to grow and flourish. He's not ashamed or resentful about spending more time at home taking care of the kids or passing on a lucrative job opportunity that would only make him busier.

”

Background

COVID-19 has exposed and widened gender disparity.

Even before the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic could subside in Canada, reports had started pouring in on its gendered impact. A United Nations policy brief stated, “Across every sphere, from health to the economy, security to social protection, the impacts of COVID-19 are exacerbated for women and girls simply by virtue of their sex.”¹ Calls for attention towards a rising shecession were being made across the world as the pandemic exacerbated existing gender inequalities and reduced female labour-force participation. In Canada, a joint report published by YWCA and GATE determined eight pillars for a feminist economic recovery plan stating, “The COVID-19 pandemic triggered a new type of recession—one that impacts women workers more than men. We need a recovery plan to address the economic fallout...By addressing the gendered impacts of COVID-19, we can build Canada’s economy back better.”²

As lockdowns were established to curb the spread of the virus, we were forced to adapt to the “new-normal” and work from home. With men spending more time at home, initial predictions suggested that they would take a greater share of housework. Unfortunately, this was not the case. A Yale-led study found that telecommuting moms spend significantly more time performing unpaid housework than telecommuting dads and that the burden of childcare more frequently impinged upon mothers’ worktime.³ The finding was ratified by several other studies including, notably, one conducted by UN Women based on Rapid Gender Assessment Surveys on the impacts of COVID-19 which stated, “Available data from 38 countries overwhelmingly confirm that both women and men have increased their unpaid workloads, but women are still doing the lion’s share. Women are also taking

on a greater intensity of care-related tasks than men.”⁴

While it is not entirely surprising that the pandemic has disproportionately impacted vulnerable populations, it is none the less disheartening. The grim reality of the plight of women warrants focussed reporting and strategic policy interventions to rectify the results of historic targeted discrimination. There is no disputing the fact that women have been systemically oppressed and continue to face substantial barriers towards self-actualization and progress.

As I dug deeper into secondary research to determine the impact of COVID-19 on families, in particular women, at home, I realized the severity of the situation. Mountains of conclusive evidence collected by several researchers is ominous. I wondered how many men went against traditional gender roles and were not part of the problem but were rather paving the way to a new, better future. Perhaps there is an opportunity to tell the stories of these men - their beliefs, aspirations, predilections, modus operandi, and motivations. Searching for a sliver of hope, I wondered where I would find these men.

First-generation immigrants seek a better life.

As a child, I often dreamed of living abroad. It symbolized a “better life” in many ways and promised upward social mobility. Lacking first-hand experience, my image of the western world was heavily influenced by sitcoms and movies. They made me imagine endless possibilities where I could be anyone, achieve anything and, most importantly, be free to be me. The allure of a socially advanced free society enchanted me.

When I finally arrived in Canada to study at Rotman, I realized the school was a melting pot of cultural diversity. As I got to know my colleagues from different countries, I found that we have all arrived with one common objective; to lead a better life. We want to

¹ United Nations (2020, April 09). *Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on Women*. Retrieved from: <https://www.unwomen.org/en/digital-library/publications/2020/04/policy-brief-the-impact-of-covid-19-on-women>

² Sultana, A. & Ravanera, C. (2020, July 28). *A Feminist Economic Recovery Plan for Canada: Making the Economy Work for Everyone*. The Institute for Gender and the Economy (GATE) and YWCA Canada. Retrieved from: www.feministrecovery.ca

³ Lyttelton, T., Zang, E., & Musick, K. (2020, July 9). *Gender Differences in Telecommuting and Implications for Inequality at Home and Work*. <https://doi.org/10.31235/osf.io/tdf8c>

⁴ UN Women (2020, November 25). *Whose time to care: Unpaid care and domestic work during COVID-19*. Retrieved from: <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/whose-time-care-unpaid-care-and-domestic-work-during-covid-19>

live differently than our parents and moving to Canada provides us this opportunity. Here, miles away from home, we can finally break away from most regressive aspects of our home countries, celebrating diversity and multiculturalism. This piqued my curiosity as I wondered if and how the underlying need to lead a better, more wholesome life translated to the home.

"I come from a patriarchal society. My mom spent more time raising me than my father. Families are changing now. People are recognizing that there is no fixed template and gender roles that define a family. The traditional concept of family no longer represents the reality of today's households."



Hence, I decided to focus my research on first-generation heterosexual millennial immigrant couples to understand how they establish a safe and equitable home. I conducted in-depth interviews with 12 people (8 men; 4 women) broadly focused on the following four themes:

- Understanding roles in partnerships
- Distribution of housework and responsibilities
- Valuation of different housework, and
- Modelling behaviours

The purpose of my research is not to be prescriptive. My intentions are not to dictate to other men how they should be or to be a moral judge. Rather, I only wish to be a messenger, presenting stories of the people I interviewed and the insights I decrypted from them. I am confident in my reader's abilities to reach their own conclusions and deduce what it means for them. Throughout this article, you will find several short snippets of stories and candid anecdotes derived directly from the interviews. Organizational psychologist Peg Neuhauser found that learning which stems from a well-told story is remembered more accurately, and for far longer.⁵ I hope to use this to my advantage.

When it comes to domestic life, first-generation immigrants want to be different from their parents. They consider the family models they grew up in to be dated and incompatible with today's lifestyle, especially outside their home countries.

"I never really thought that I wanted to be like my dad. He is not a bad man, but he belongs to a different generation. He never did any household tasks, and my working mother would have to take care of home alone."

They make a conscious attempt at maintaining equity at home. But what does it mean to be an equitable partner?

⁵ Boris, V. (2017, December 20). *What Makes Storytelling So Effective For Learning?* Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning. Retrieved from: <https://www.harvardbusiness.org/what-makes-storytelling-so-effective-for-learning/>

Research Findings

Equitable partnerships are not equal. They are fair.

From my interviews I gathered that equitable partnerships do not mean equal. It is not as simple as creating a clean 50:50 split, and neither is that thought to be ideal. The terms of equitable partnerships are not set in stone. Everyone I spoke to agreed that the weight of a relationship is constantly shifting between partners. From an outsider's perspective, equitable partnerships may seem skewed but, for the partners in them, it is balanced.

Equitable partnerships are fair. They are not rigid structures but rather quite fluid, easily, and quickly moulding to changing circumstances. What is "fair" in a partnership differs for each relationship and life stage.

"I wanted my wife to have the opportunity to excel in her job. She was a project manager and was earning more than me. I too had a very busy career, but I felt like I was putting too much pressure on her to take care of our child as well as work-full time. So, I decided to take paternity leave and focus on raising my child while my wife continued to work. It worked out really well for us because my wife was up for a promotion and I got to be with my daughter a lot more. That's always nice."



Fairness is often accompanied by compromises. However, these compromises are not enforced but instead chosen for the greater good of the relationship. It is important for each partner to have freedom to make their own choices, although these are often discussed collaboratively.

"In our marriage we make healthy levels of compromise and we're happy to make those

compromises to maintain our relationship. It's never to a point where we're unhappy about the choices we make. When that happens, we talk things out. To me, his happiness is as important as mine."

On exploring the notion of 'fairness' further, I realized that equitable partnerships require fairness at both the collective level and the individual level. The following sections discuss the nuances pertaining to these renditions of fairness in equitable partnerships.

Collective Level

The collective level implies establishing fairness between partners so that no one person feels overwhelmed. Each partner assumes a degree of responsibility proportional to their abilities and availability.

"I guess on a day-to-day basis it amounts to simple things such as sharing of household tasks. If one cooks the other cleans. This might seem trivial, but it makes a difference."

At its core, equitable partnerships at the collective level require active teamwork. The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. It is about acting as both complements and substitutes for one another as necessary. Equitable partners are adaptive experts, quickly learning new tasks and being flexible. This requires both to be constantly synchronized, playing to one another's strengths, and managing weaknesses.

"There is an unsaid understanding that if either of us are busy, the one who has some time takes on more responsibility. You just must have each other's back."

Working as one unit, responsibilities in equitable partnerships are shared (perhaps not equally), flexible, and renegotiable. Nothing is set in stone and partners are continuously adapting to changing needs. In essence, equitable partnerships are agile and ever evolving.

"When we got married, there was a mutual understanding that just because I'm a woman doesn't mean that I will be doing all the household tasks."

At the collective level, decision-making is not monopolized by any one person. Rather, it is joint or cooperative. Often, this means actively consulting one another before making decisions, being willing to adapt and compromise when needed, and keeping the best interest of the partnership at heart. An interesting point in the data is the quote below. Power in a relationship is not concentrated with the person who earns the most. Non-monetary contributions in equitable partnerships are considered equally valuable.

"When my partner and I started living together, it was clear that I couldn't split the finances equally because I'm a student and he's working. But just because he's bringing in more money, doesn't mean that he holds the power in our relationship or makes all the decisions. I contribute in other ways at home and have an equal say in important decisions. These are hard conversations to have, and it takes work to get past these things."

Equitable partnerships are led with empathy. Partners often anticipate each other's needs, understand each other's strengths and limitations, and quickly pivot to substitute for one another. Their actions are underlaid with the understanding that they are part of one team and must support one another to realize benefits. If they were to follow rigid traditional gender roles, this would not be possible.

"It's not about gender equality but just understanding each other's challenges and anticipating your partner's needs. It's about partnership. I love that word because it's about creating a balance and working as a team to support each other."

Lastly, and most interestingly, there is great emphasis laid on maintaining the emotional health of the family. This is considered a shared responsibility which consists of providing comfort and respect, as well as enabling and supporting each other's growth.

"Partnership is about compromising and building upon each other's strengths. Providing the space for each other to grow. It's caring for the other, for the other's sake."

It's about taking the time to balance the partnership by doing your share of the work and supporting one another."

Additionally, the quote below is from a man who refused to let his ego get in the way of his relationship. Instead, he chose to flip the narrative, feeling proud of having such an understanding and supportive partner.

"I have been doing my MBA for almost two years and my wife is the one bringing in the money. But this doesn't make me any less of a "man". In fact, it makes me proud and happy that I have such a supporting partner who is willing to come on this journey with me."

Individual Level

"Even in a marriage you have to provide space to your partner. After putting my daughter to sleep, I'm in my room watching my favourite TV show and my husband games online. We don't always need time together, sometimes we just need time apart."

As mentioned earlier, equitable partnerships



require fairness even at an individual level. Partners seek avenues to freely express and be themselves. There is no space for personal judgement. Rather, partners actively

work to discover each other, keeping biases at bay and being willing to accommodate. They understand that being together does not preclude them from being themselves and that the expression of self is essential. They do not shy away from drawing personal boundaries and making explicit their limitations.

"Due to the pandemic, we've been working from home for the past year. It's easy and even tempting to simply turn around and start chatting with my wife. After all, she is my best friend, and I can be myself with her. But she's quite busy with work during the day and I don't want to constantly disturb her."

So, in an effort to draw boundaries, during working hours we text one another even though we're literally sitting next to each other. This way we both get a chance to reply when we are less busy, allowing us to concentrate on work without constantly losing focus.

It's not just about creating space for each other but also respecting it."

In fact, the partnership works only when they embrace vulnerability and reveal their true selves. The notion of equitable partnerships and self are inextricably interlinked and there is space as well as necessity for both to exist. However, men find it particularly hard to be vulnerable, even with their partners.

"It's not easy for men to be vulnerable. We're expected to always have our game face on, be emotionless, be macho, and do all the things a man is supposed to do. It took me a long time to be able to cry in front of my partner. I don't know many men who would admit to crying. I find it therapeutic. Sometimes I tell my friends and they laugh."

Men seek psychological safety to be vulnerable, believing they are victims of conditioning that dictates them to suppress their emotions rather than acknowledging and expressing them.

"As a child, I remember my father to be very strict and controlling. I was constantly afraid of making him angry so I would be very selective in the things I discussed at home. This made it hard for me to emotionally open

up as a child. I never thought I could express my emotions or be vulnerable without being judged."

They have been taught from a young age that display of emotions is a sign of weakness. Hence, now when they struggle with problems of emotional complexity, men find it hard to express and seek help.



"When I have a problem, I have a hard time expressing it to my partner and instead tend to self-diagnosis. As men, we aren't taught to openly ask for help. It somehow seems emasculating and makes me feel like I've failed."

This stigma is reinforced and perpetuated by other men and those who do not conform often incur a heavy social penalty in the form of ridicule or even ostracization.

"I never saw my dad cry. Not once. Perhaps it's because he wanted to seem tough. He's of a different generation but men today aren't very different. A lot of times we're just told to buck up and deal with things."

However, some acknowledge these challenges and try to be incrementally more expressive at home with each passing day. They realize that bottling up emotions does

more harm than good in the long-term and can have detrimental consequences for the relationship.

"It took me time to express my emotions to my partner and I realize that this is because of my conditioning. However, it's important for me to be able to be my complete self in a relationship."

Interestingly, I learned that equitable partnerships must also incorporate time for self-nurturing and self-nourishment. Some actively seek experiences to pamper and indulge their senses. Having "me time" built into a partnership is a prerequisite for emotional wellbeing and happiness.

"Sometimes I like to sneak out to get myself an ice cream. Does it make me a bad person if I don't want to share my favourite flavour!?"

Most agree that taking time away from home and their partners to independently recharge is essential to maintaining the emotional health at home. They do so by socializing with friends over games and movies or exploring hobbies and passions. In equitable partnerships, there is a great emphasis on the preservation of individual identity, requirement of space for personal growth and development, and establishment of boundaries.

"It's important to be ourselves and maintain our individual identity, fuelling and supporting each other to grow by creating the space to discover ourselves. My wife knows that sometimes I just need time with my boys. She doesn't interfere and understands that it's important for my emotional well-being."

So, if partners tend to be cognizant of creating equity at both the collective and individual level then what happens at home when such partnerships are put to the test?



Homes are not divided on gender lines. They are pragmatic.

In equitable partnerships, gender roles at home are non-existent and each partner is equally adept and equally responsible. Tasks that might traditionally be associated with a gender are now treated with fluidity. Equitable homes are pragmatic spaces where tasks and responsibilities are split on more practical considerations. Let us understand this in more detail.

Division of Housework is Gender Neutral

Instead of relying on a fixed gender model, who does housework in an equitable partnership is determined by multiple factors such as knowing and playing off each other's strengths. Partners have core competencies that make them faster, more effective as well as more efficient at completing certain tasks. Completing these tasks then becomes their primary responsibilities at home. For instance, take the story below.

"I am an engineer. I love building things and I'm really good at it. When I was a kid, I used to help my dad with the car or repairing something in the house. My partner is not very good at it. So, every time we get some furniture that requires assembling, he hands it over to me as says "here's your box". It's not about gender roles but rather what I enjoy doing and what my strengths are."

Another factor is acknowledging preferences, things each partner likes or dislikes doing. Some people I have spoken to love to clean while others are not as keen. Preferences are normally discussed in advance and tasks split accordingly.

"Split of household tasks is mostly determined by preference for tasks. Sometimes we share tasks we both like doing and take turns doing the tasks we don't like. For instance, she knows I like to cook so she helps out by chopping vegetables or cleaning up the kitchen. Because it is based on preferences it doesn't require coaxing."

Although, another factor is being very particular about the way tasks are done. Some define it as having a strong, sometimes

irrational, need to have things set a certain way. Anything less is cause for discontentment, annoyance, and in some cases even mild anxiety. When people realize this need in their partners, they generally tend to hand over responsibility of that particular task. For instance, a man I interviewed told me that he does not clean the washroom because no matter how well he does it, his wife recleans it every time as it provides her peace of mind. So, they mutually agreed that she would be in-charge of cleaning the washrooms while the husband took over other tasks that did not matter as much to her.

"I'm very particular about the way I keep my home. So, for me, doing household tasks like cleaning isn't really a chore but rather something I want to do to maintain a certain standard of living. I do it for me."

Additionally, availability and time constraints often dictate housework allocation. Most of the couples I interviewed have full-time careers and lead extremely busy lives. Through the day, as pockets of time become available, each goes about completing a house task. Hence, by breaking up big tasks into little ones, they keep on top of housework to avoid letting things pile up.

"We have a natural understanding that work at home needs to be split based on who has more time. He cooks delicious things, but it takes him hours and I'm just a faster cook. So, I cook on the weekdays and he cooks on the weekends and holidays. Over time it has become more of a well-choreographed dance and we know who is required to do what when."

Attaining Fulfilment Through Housework

An interesting finding from my interviews is that many people find fulfilment through housework. Completing them is somehow rewarding. It provides them a sense of accomplishment, satisfaction, pride, and joy.

"I think I associate a sense of pride with having a clean house, so it doesn't bother me when I spend time cleaning over the weekend."

For some, housework allows them to disconnect from the world and provides much needed respite from everyday stress. Focusing on a simple, ritualistic task that forces them to be present in the moment provides them an opportunity to reflect and recharge.



"My husband loves to cook. He puts on music and is always on the hunt for new recipes to try out. I think it helps him destress and the pay-out is a delicious meal!"

Others claim that housework has a calming and therapeutic effect. For instance, the repetitive motion of vacuuming the floor, or the sound of flowing water while washing dishes is said to calm the senses. Not only are these described as meditative experiences, but once complete, they provide a sense of satisfaction in the form of a clean house.

"I recently got this product that takes off water stains from bathroom tiles. I was so excited

and super proud of myself when I got done and the bathroom was spotless. It was a meditative experience."

Housework can get boring especially in our current stage of lockdown during the pandemic. However, many couples prefer to work together on mundane household tasks and use this as an opportunity to bond.

"We go grocery shopping together and even wash dishes together. It's more fun that way. Mundane tasks are only mundane if you let them be."

The benefit of performing housework is in its simplicity and straightforwardness. It is typically characterized by a low cognitive lift and hence opens-up the space to engage in meaningful and lively conversations that can bring couples closer. Even important decisions are sometimes debated while performing housework.

"Having a young child makes it really hard to go out on dates so grocery runs have become our new date nights! It's just nice to be able to spend time together."

For instance, many of the individuals I interviewed admit to cooking and chopping vegetables together, washing and drying the dishes together, shopping for groceries together, walking the dog together, cleaning the house together, or folding the laundry together.

"We walk the dogs together in the evenings after work. It's my favourite time of the day because we get to talk to one another and catch up on our days while also playing with our dogs."

If equitable partnerships are gender neutral and potentially use housework to attain fulfilment, then how easy are they to achieve?

Equitable partnerships are not accidental. They are built over time with effort.

Turns out that the adage of “if it is too good to be true then it probably is” holds some water here. Equitable partnerships are not happy accidents. They are built with time and effort and require constant maintenance. Each aspect of an equitable partnership is thoughtfully crafted to suit the unique needs of the couple. Hence, there is no winning formula that can be prescribed to turn any relationship into an equitable one. A key element that smooths and even expedites the process is communication, both verbal and non-verbal.

Verbal Communication

The thing to remember with effective communication is that it is a two-way street. Equitable partners leverage empathy and safe space they have created at home to be vulnerable and discuss the things that truly bother them.

“The key to an equitable relationship is open communication. It’s about uncovering your own biases on how relationships should work and being empathetic towards your partner, understanding their daily challenges. It’s not about being right but letting your partner know why you feel the way you feel.”

Setting expectation early on through open and direct conversations helps avoid misalignment in the future. Hiding one’s true feelings towards the other’s actions often gives rise to similar situations in the future that can prove to be stressful and detrimental to the partnership.

“It’s best to set expectations early on. Communication breaks down especially when I give my wife a very short runway to prepare and adjust her schedules. That can lead to a lot of frustration. So, I set reasonable expectations and be clear about what I can and cannot do.”

Holding things in and bottling them up does not help anyone. Equitable partners often try to be receptive of feedback and are willing to change their ways. However, they require

active communication to help them navigate emotional complexities.

“I have a very open and honest style of communication with my partner. We tend to talk about the things that are bothering us. I choose to openly communicate my thoughts and feelings to my partner rather than expect him to read my mind. I don’t like leaving things unsaid. I’d rather tell him how I’m feeling than hold it in and feel annoyed.”

Apart from having open conversations, equitable partners are often curious. They ask questions when they feel at a loss and this mitigates misunderstandings.

“Don’t assume that you know what’s best for your partner. Instead ask them what they would like. It’s so essential and yet we often forget.

I remember one time when I came home, and my partner seemed upset. I assumed I had done something wrong. So, I went about doing the dishes, making the bed, and cooking us dinner to appease her. However, she still seemed sad. I sat by her and said, “I’ve done all these things, why are you still upset?” And, she turned to me and said, “Did you even bother asking why I might be upset?”

Sometimes understanding someone is just as important as loving them.”

Last, but not least, equitable partners frame their mindset to actively listen. For them, this is as important, if not more important, than expressing themselves. Remembering that active communication is two-way street, they openly give as well as receive feedback from one another. This helps them understand each other better and allows them to grow.

“Communication is not just about knowing what to say and how to say it but also about listening and being empathetic of each other’s needs and limitations. It’s about making the effort to understand your partner – their likes and dislikes – and being there for them in the way they want you to be there for them.”



“

I know when my wife is having a stressful day with lots of meetings. I like to go in between calls and give her hugs and kisses to cheer her up and keep her going. I make it a point to take on more household tasks when I know she's going to be busy. She does the same for me.

”

Non-Verbal Communication

Things get more interesting when we move to non-verbal communication. Often, instead of words, actions are chosen as the medium to express appreciation and care. For many, words are just not enough. Hence, they consciously partake in performing small acts of service for each other.

"I really hate making the bed every morning! What's the point of it? We'll be sleep in it again anyway. But my wife cannot start her day without making the bed. So, sometimes when I know she's got a busy day ahead, I make the bed. It's a really small act and though I hate it, I put in the effort to do it because I know it's important to her."

This physical manifestation of their appreciation seldom goes unnoticed and often leads to increased affection for one another. Completing housework as an act of service is also considered to be an expression of care.

"I've explained to my partner why having a clean house is important to me. Now, I see him proactively cleaning when he has some time because he knows it's important to me."

When acts of service are performed by a partner, it is also important to recognize their effort. Recognition can be in the form of verbal communication but sometimes also manifests non-verbally for example giving a hug. Recognition and praise are greatly appreciated, especially when done publicly.

"My husband makes a very good risotto. So, when friends come over, I always ask him to make it. He complains but I think he secretly likes it when I compliment his dish and recognize his efforts in front of others."

It does not have to be a massive undertaking each time. Small acts of care also go a long way. These acts remain in the collective memory of the partnership and are often reciprocated with equal zeal. There is no set time horizon for this exchange. For some it is instantaneous while others build it into their ongoing daily routines.

"Since we're working from home, I set up her desk every morning before work so that she can just plug-in and get going. It's one less friction or mental burden she has to overcome to get the day started."

Additionally, paying attention to everyday habits and anticipating partner's needs shows care. As discussed earlier, equitable partners openly share and receive feedback. This tendency allows them to curate their acts of service to the specific needs of their partner thereby maximizing impact.

"I take him snacks in the middle of the day or when I go to the kitchen, I ask him if I can get him something. Often times he brings me tea or fruits to keep me going. I often tell him how much I appreciate him thinking about me and knowing when I need a boost."

While anticipating the needs of their partners, some men take it a step further through deductive observation. They put time and effort into differentiating between the physical and emotional needs of their partner to elevate both. This increases the feeling of interconnection between partners.

"He puts in an effort to make me laugh when I'm feeling stressed. Sometimes he just comes and asks me how I am doing, and it makes me feel cared for and connected because he's paying attention to my needs."

The power and influence of effective verbal and non-verbal communication is particularly strong in shaping equitable partnerships. In many cases, it forms the foundational bedrock atop which multiple layers of a relationship are instated. However, you might be wondering what has shaped these men's communication norms as well as other behaviours and attitudes they carry into their partnerships to be the way they are today. Have they had a dominant influence and what or whom might this have been?

Other men are not men's role models. Women are.

Recalling that I interviewed first-generation immigrants, life for them has been in a constant state of flux. Their home countries are witnessing rapid socio-cultural and economic growth. They have witnessed first-hand the oppressive effects of generational patriarchy and many seem to have had enough. Hence, they come to Canada seeking "better lives".

"I think I'm doing a lot more than my father used to and know that I still have a long way to go. I remember as I child my mother would do everything for me despite having a full-time job. I saw her struggle with competing personal and professional priorities. It really shaped my perspective. I knew that if I ever got married, I wouldn't put my wife in this position."

While there are multiple interpretations of 'modern manhood', a striking commonality is that it is defined and influenced by the women in their lives. When considering equitable partnerships at home, these men often cast back to women who they subconsciously experienced as role models at a young age. Everyone I spoke to agreed that while there are plenty of professional male role models for other men to look up to, there are no aspirational domestic male role models.

"In my family we have very strong female role models. My mum has been my biggest role model and has shaped the way I want to have relationships."

She had a rough life. She got married early and couldn't finish her education. My father didn't recognize or appreciate her, and they got separated later. Despite not having a



formal degree, she took it upon herself to start a small business and support our family.

She empowered herself, earned money, and remarried. This is why I want to study and have a career. I don't want to build my life solely around another person but rather have someone who wants to be with me as I explore my own path."

First-generation immigrant men seek socio-cultural reprogramming. Their parent's norms are no longer appropriate for the equitable partnerships they seek to build. The lack of domestic male role models forces them to look at other sources to guide their behaviour at home. Hence, many navigate home life on their own and devise their own strategies through trial and error to become equitable partners.

"In many ways, I strive not to be like my father in my marriage. He is a product of his generation and upbringing and that has shaped his behaviour growing up. For example, he would never share a problem he was contending with. Instead, he would bottle it up inside and keep cool on the outside. His decisions were always final. There wasn't an opportunity to explore ideas or try things differently."

The same is not true for the women I interviewed. They believe they have several instances of domestic female role models to rely upon starting from their mothers and other immediate family.

"My mother is my biggest role model. She hasn't gone to college or has the confidence to make money. But being a mom, I think she had the hardest and most thankless job of all. She always put my needs above hers. I am who I am because of her."

There is an intrinsic melancholy to the expectation of gendered role models for home. However, for many, there are still positive outcomes to be derived from observing their parents' partnerships. They emulate the positive and productive behaviours of either parent regardless of gender, taking away these values to replicate in their own partnerships. Their experience and interpretation of their parents'

partnership also provides them examples of behaviours and values they do not wish to carry forward. For some it shaped the anti-role model of who they do not want to be rather than guiding who they become.



"I want my relationship to look quite different from that of my parents. My parents are very sexist in the way they operate. My dad doesn't even know how to turn on a gas stove. But it's how they were brought up. Looking back at my parent's relationship, I now realize that it was quite dysfunctional. I want to be more progressive."

For many men, a core trait of a progressive, equitable partnership lies in breaking their silence and expressing their emotions freely. These men do not want to bottle up their emotions like their fathers which would only serve to distance them from their partners. They want to change and be part of a cohesive sum working together towards a mutually desired outcome. Their partners too support and encourage them to explore their emotional and vulnerable side, wishing to be included in that journey of self-discovery.

"I think it's important for men to be in touch with their emotions. Not be ashamed of having strong emotional outburst like crying or even expressing joy and pride. Not be afraid to be vulnerable or ask for help. It is important for them to know that we are all human. I want my partner to feel that he can talk about anything and that I will be there to support and help him."

However, there are exceptions to the norm, and many have been fortunate enough to have witnessed some progressive behaviours from their fathers.

"My dad was an inspiration to me. I remember when I was little, I needed my school uniform for next day, but my skirt was all wrinkled up after coming out of the wash. My dad refused to send me to school like that. He ironed the skirt for me while also teaching me how to do it. I was impressed he even knew how to operate the iron."

Hopefully, our generation takes this one step further to encourage and facilitate the creation of domestic male role models, providing them the necessary tools and support to be better men at home while also inspiring the next generation of men.





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When growing up, I learned a lot of things from my grandmother. Both my parents would work, and I would come home to my grandmother every afternoon after school. To keep me occupied, she'd involve me in helping out with tasks at home. She'd pamper me by cooking my favourite dishes and I'd often help out. It's where I think I found my love for cooking. I even learned how to wash the laundry and dishes from her. Looking back, I can tell she has had a profound impact in shaping the way I am today.

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The Opportunity

The anecdotes shared throughout this article are meant to serve two purposes. First, to expose the domestic lives of men which are rarely acknowledged and spoken about. To me, it seems like a disservice to men that this half (arguably the better half) of a man's life is shrouded in mystery. We normally only hear of professionally and financially successful men. The fact that not a single person I interviewed admitted that men have domestic male role models to look up to is surely an eyebrow raiser.

Second, the anecdotes are also shared to serve as inspiration to other men who might be struggling to find their identity at home. The hope is that you have been able to relate to some of the stories and insights shared in this article. The fact that you took the time to read this article implies that you are probably already doing something right. However, each of us has room to grow. Following are a few suggestive actions that might help us get the ball rolling.

For Individuals: Pause. Reflect. Adjust.

We lead busy lives and there is always a temptation to move on to the next item on the endless list of things that need to be done. Often this means we take for granted aspects of our life that are assumed to be stable such as our domestic life. However, life at home for many forms the bedrock of stability that allows us to grow and flourish as humans in other areas of life. Just as progress in professional life requires investments in upskilling, progress of domestic life also requires ongoing active maintenance. Hence, it is imperative to pause from the humdrum of our busy lives and take stock of everything we have achieved including in our personal lives at home. Have we been the best version of ourselves across all domains of life? How can we build pauses in our days to consider such questions? Is there an opportunity for us to encourage our partners to also take these pauses with us to create space for fruitful discussions?

From early childhood, many of us begin to build mental models of whom we aspire to become as adults. Rarely do we place similar emphasis on the men we want to be at home as we grow up. As we pause, let us reflect on the kind of person we want to be at home and what we must do to get there. Let us

solicit candid feedback from our partner or family, understand how they perceive us, and what we can do differently at home to support them. Let us discuss what equity at home means to them and what needs to be done to achieve it. Let us make this part of family time or dinner conversations. The emotional health of home pervades all other aspects of life. If we start discussing this early with children and young adults, we can get them thinking about this in their formative years. No model is perfect but some of the best solutions are centred around the needs of its stakeholders. How can we co-create our home spaces to be more equitable for everyone in it?

Once we complete our own personalized audit through pauses and reflections, it is now time to think of concrete actions. What micro-adjustments could we make to enhance equity at home? How can we build in mutual accountability while ensuring that home is a safe space for each family member to express themselves? How can we communicate more effectively to show appreciation and care? How can we emulate behaviours of our children and other young adults to seek equity throughout life? What is the impact of our behaviours as we interact with others? How might we influence others and be positive role models for those around us, either our peers or our children?

For Organizations: Support. Inspire.

For the most part, especially during the pandemic, organizations have largely redesigned their workspaces to accommodate for expression of individual identity. They value their employees and make it a point to work alongside them, ensuring their professional development. Many organizations now provide flexible work hours, mental health days, guided meditation and exercise during work hours, home finance and family support services such as child and elderly care, health coaching, and career counselling. These incentives are provided as part of a larger initiative to support employees and mitigate some stress.

However, conducting this research has made me realize that organizations can play a bigger role in unleashing the full potential of their employees. To unlock this next level requires employees to also excel in other areas of life including that of home. As the

impact of the raging global pandemic deepens, work-from-home has become the new norm for many of us. This in turn has further blurred the line separating work and home life, collapsing them into one. We have had to adapt quickly and forcefully, constantly switching from work mode to home mode throughout the day. Not only is this struggle real, but in most cases, it is also publicly put on display for our colleagues to view with the proliferation and increasing use of video conferencing tools and technologies. We have little choice but to invite our colleagues, figuratively and literally, into our homes daily as we go about our work.

As a first step, most organizations already acknowledge and are understanding of the added stress the pandemic has placed on the lives of their employees. By being empathetic towards the pressures that come along with working from home, they recognize that fixed working hours are no longer feasible for many. However, there is an opportunity here to appreciate that it is hard for employees to realize their full potential if they do not have the space or the opportunity to bring their complete self to work. Employees are not covert operatives with the ability to lead two distinct lives.

Hence, ensure that the workplace is a safe space for your employees and encourage them to be open about their life at home. Men might feel under pressure to maintain their pre-pandemic professional image and might therefore tend to isolate themselves from their family at home to achieve that effect. This might create added tension at home as the woman of the house is left to pick up the pieces and solely manage home responsibilities. Instead, organizations can choose to actively work towards changing the narrative of the company culture by normalizing and creating social acceptance of men's household responsibilities. One way to achieve this is by having open leaders share their home stories and family successes as they work. Another way is to celebrate the men who choose to take family time in the form of parental leave to care for their newborn or pickup their child from day care or take their kids on hikes and adventures. Be receptive to the idea of them babysitting or pet-sitting during team meetings. Provide them the opportunity to take technology

black out days to take care of home and family needs.

Summary

Each opportunity area poses questions that require further introspection for both individuals and organizations. It is hard to provide a one-size-fits-all solution since each household has specific needs and is unique in the way it operates. When we talk about gender equity, it is not just about providing women access to opportunities and giving them more responsibility. It is also about redistributing the burden of tasks that disproportionately falls on them thereby allowing them more time to focus on their personal development and growth.

Men are now understanding how traditional gender roles and stereotypes have not just impacted women but has also tarnished their ability to achieve their full potential. Conducting this research has rekindled my hope and bolstered my belief that we are not too far from realizing the benefits of gender equity for all sexes. Perhaps we can come together and reimagine equity at home, leading by example for the men and women of the future.

