



from the OUTER BANKS

MAID IN AUSTRALIA

Housework in the land Down Under.

Judy Banks reports
from Perth.

Troops in the Australian gender war have recently been armed by the results of two international studies. The first, covering several countries, found that when it comes to domestic kitchen hygiene only India and Malaysia rank lower than Australia. Our toilet areas are a sparkling example to the rest of the world but close inspection of kitchen cloths and taps might reveal miniscule bacterial cities with billboards advertising cut-price tariffs at Hepatitis Heights with its superb views and proximity to amenities, or Listeria Lodge at the water's edge. The second study, across twelve nations, concluded that Australian men make the world's worst husbands. If an Aussie woman wants a hubbie who'll help with household chores, she'll need to order one from Britain, Scandinavia or the US.

Par for the course, the Australian media presented statistics in an abbreviated though sensational manner and it's been left to men and women at barbecues across the nation to defend, explain, reject or herald the results. In some instances the findings rouse little reaction. After all, this is the no-worries country. There may be a slight lifting of the left shoulder on the part of women; men may express indignation by blinking twice in succession. But at gatherings where the coals are a little hotter, I've seen debates become verbal boxing bouts with occasional knockout blows, Ali-like dodging, and times-out to assess tactics. Arguments range from the reasonable to the fantastic.

Reasonable: Women's place in not where the hearth is

Any man who uses the dirty kitchen stats as 'evidence' of female tardiness and incompetence is doing himself no favours. He must accept a position on the WWH podium if he insists the responsibility for domestic duties lies solely in the rubber-gloved hands of women. Even under the terms of his one-party rule, a little praise and humility seem appropriate considering the germ-free state of his bathroom. Let's face it, male appendages allow for the distribution, intentional or otherwise, of liquid bodily waste over wide areas, making males the likely culprits when it comes to surface bacteria in toilet zones.

There are few wives who, following a son's or husband's sleepy bathroom visit, haven't sat on a wet toilet seat in the middle of the night. How then does the continual cleaning of male pee from toilet floors, doors, walls, bowls, seats, lids, cisterns and pipes come to be a female obligation? Even in the otherworldly eventuality that any woman accepts it as such, her bathroom achievements, under the circumstances, far outweigh any oversights in the kitchen.

Ultimately for heaven's sake, how hazardous are these dirty taps anyway? In the poorest regions of the world, a single communal tap might provide water for hundreds of people. The decreased mortality rate brought about by clean water supplies in these areas has not been offset by Spigot Disease. Salmonella is not a word appearing regularly on Australian death certificates, though that's a thought. If, in a male autocracy, a wife deemed responsible for all home duties has a spotless bathroom but a germ-ridden kitchen, perhaps she's not as careless as first assumed. Having ensured her husband's life insurance is in order, she may well be bidding for a Norwegian on ebay.

Unreasonable: Lazybones, sleeping in the shade

When commuting time is included, Richard's plumbing business devours almost 60 hours of his week. Wife Emma cooks, does some cleaning, picks up after a 17-year-old

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and volunteers 4 hours a fortnight in a library. She goes to gym most mornings, watches Neighbours every afternoon, plays bridge on Thursdays and has lunch and a movie with the girls once a month. She believes her husband is a lazy bastard, a WWH candidate, for instead of catching up on 'his half' of the week's washing/ironing/vacuuming/dishes etc., Richard spends Saturday and Sunday afternoons attached to a beer bottle, watching Fox Sports.

"We don't live in the Dark Ages," whined Emma at an evening's gathering. "Housework is no longer a woman's domain."

When shown that in real terms Richard's working hours far exceed her own, she dismissed the calculation with, "It's not the same. He'd still work if he didn't have a family."

She admitted that Rich baths Arnold the Dobermann, attends to home repairs, mows, digs and chops in the garden and washes the car.

The battle against lingering chauvinism may not yet be over in Australia, but there are no women better suited to the struggle: the fury of an Aussie woman denied a fair go could shift tectonic plates.

"He's physically stronger than I am," she reasoned. "And besides, that's outside stuff."

Frankly, I just wanted to give her a slap on the head. Our feminist ancestors did not set out to replace tyrants of one gender with those of the other. To my great pleasure, it was women involved in the conversation who corked Emma's griping.

"Would you trade places with Richard, swap roles, for two weeks?"

"God, no! Women can't ..."

She trailed off as a female booing chorus drowned her words. Joan handed Richard a stubby. I suspect she also gave him her phone number.

Sheer Fantasy: The glass is cleaner on the other side

Not everyone at the little party was as wretched as Emma. There were blissfully wedded couples and singles of both genders who watched in amused silence as the most disgruntled of their married friends pulled out prehistoric cudgels for the final round.

"Substandard hygiene's inevitable while men live."

"Female logic! Who looks behind the stove?"

"Born slobs. They're all the same."

"Obsessive Cleaning Disorder – a women's disease."

In other words, it's all about genes: not a case of will and won't, do and don't, but of can and can't. If the assertions of these unhappy people are anything to go by, daylight is the consequence of single women opening their curtains each morning. Unburdened by the slovenly nature of men and/or driven by an inherent compulsion, single women are free to sate their dust lust and keep homes like those featured in glossy décor magazines. Kitchen cloths can safely double as baby-wipes, bench-tops as operating tables, trashcans as punchbowls. Sticky tape, dental floss and dairy products can be located in seconds.

Allied to these beliefs, single men live stress-free, logical lives, avoiding chores in reasonable anticipation of natural disasters. They share their homes with rodents and strange creatures that began life in tubs of yoghurt; fridges bulge with cartons of soured, unfound milk, and sneaker stench brings about the enforced and unnecessary relocation of nearby factories.

Anyone who believes such things is deluded. I say so with authority as the majority of people I know are single. Their homes disprove arguments that domestic efficiency (cleaning obsessions) and laziness (time management) are determined by gender. It's a matter of choice and circumstance.

Divorcees Joan and Lisa keep immaculate homes: nightmares of antiseptic, white surfaces from ceilings to tile grout. But take Donna. After twenty years of maintaining a residential showpiece, she divorced. A decade later, her home is decidedly lived in. Laundry and ironing accumulate; materials for countless projects are stacked or strewn across counters and tables; pillows and blankets have permanent residence on TV-lounge sofas and the sticky tape hasn't been seen since March. Periodically, Donna equips herself with dusters, mops, a bucket and ammonia and attacks everything from carpets to gutters. Other than that, she's happily re-prioritised – and she's not alone. Carol and Linda, former cleaning- dynamos, tell similar tales.

And single men, the guys who will, potentially, make the world's worst husbands?

Years ago, as an immigrant in need of cash, I cleaned the house of my friend George. Once a week I mopped floors that weren't dirty, washed non-existent rings from the tub and poured bleach into an already pristine toilet bowl. Easy money.

I keep shoes on and disinfect plates before eating at Tony's house. In Denis' home, plastic bags are colour coded and dental floss is never anywhere but in the wicker basket on the right hand side of the shelf above the oven.

Denis wasn't always so particular. He used to be married.

Domestic skills, manias, tardiness and laid-back outlooks are not gender specific traits. Changed circumstances bring about changed attitudes.

My single female friends claim they copped the majority of domestic chores during marriage; the men willingly confess that as husbands, they didn't pull their weight in the home. But when asked their reasons for divorce, neither group lists housework as a cause of marriage breakdown. The battle against lingering chauvinism may not yet be over in Australia, but there are no women better suited to the struggle: the fury of an Aussie woman denied a fair go could shift tectonic plates. As for the WWH ratings – when assessing a husband's or potential husband's worth, his domestic input is surely only one of many considerations. When George employed me to clean his spotless home, he wasn't paying for something that he was unable to do himself. In the very real Australian spirit of mateship, he was helping out a pal without robbing her of her pride. Australians are the most compassionate and generous of people I've known anywhere. If these qualities were taken into account, how would the nation's husbands fare on a global scale?

Bottom line of the housework debate: If you find a spouse's unreasonable standards, idleness, nagging or tyranny too much to bear, try going it alone. Chances are, once you've washed away your previous life, polished your independence, ironed out a new routine and swept up impractical dreams, Singledom will scrub up differently to anything you anticipated.



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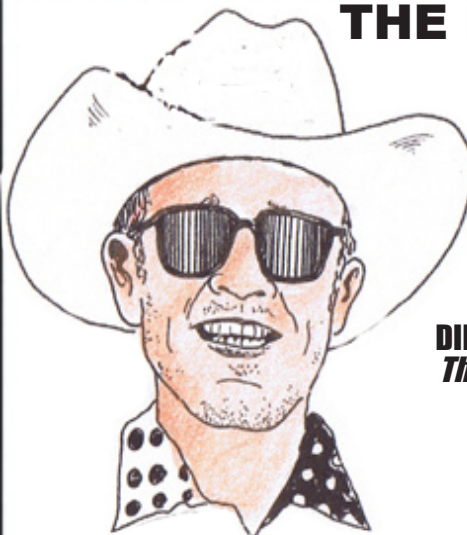
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OF ITS OWN!
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TAKE OUT AN AD...

HELP KEEP THE ZEPHYR
THE 'VOICE OF THE PEOPLE.'

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Lewis Downey...SLC, UT
Michaelene Pendleton...Moab, UT
Dennis Young...Grand Jct, CO
Robert Vance...Flagstaff, AZ
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Dorothy Dahlenburg...St. Paul, MN
John Allen...Rangely, CO
Izzy Nelsom...Moab, UT
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Jim Macey...Keeler, CA
Grace Burgevin...Hotchkiss, CO
Sara Bartels...Paicines, CA
David Lanning...Prescott Valley, AZ
David Kozlowski...Santa fe, NM
Dorothy Dahlenburg...St Paul, MN