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Mother's little helpers

A new generation of working women are outsourcing – and this time they're not ashamed to admit it.

By **Cosima Marriner with Nina Karnikowski**

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Goodbye, Superwoman, you unrealistic ideal for working mothers. No longer do we have to pretend to the world we're you – while imploding inside with the impossibility of doing it all.

We know from bitter experience we can't forge a career, raise a family and run a household all by ourselves if we want to stay sane. So we've found a new role model: Outsourcing Woman.



Times have changed ... for today's time-poor women, it makes sense to outsource some domestic chores. GETTY IMAGES

She buys the groceries online, uses childcare or a nanny, employs a cleaner, orders in gourmet mid-week meals, sends out the laundry and ironing and maybe even relies on an online personal assistant to keep track of birthdays. Outsourcing Woman pays people

As more women return to work after having babies, they're realising that outsourcing domestic tasks is the only way to stay on top of their hectic lives. They have the money to afford help, and a say in how the family budget is spent. More importantly, less time on chores means more time with their children.

"There is more of an understanding that we're not all superwomen, we can't do everything," says Danielle Robertson, who runs the Australia-wide Dial-An-Angel agency. "We focus on the things we're good at, and that might not be cleaning ... It comes down to taking some of the pressure off."



Sixty-five per cent of Australian women with dependent children are now in some form of paid work, compared with 43 per cent of mothers 20 years ago, according to the University of Sydney's professor of employment relations, Marian Baird.

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), gross household weekly incomes soared 50 per cent between 2004 and 2010, leaving more money to pay for outsourcing (though women still only earn about 80 per cent of what their male counterparts are paid). Cooking is the top chore we outsource, followed by childcare, gardening, laundry and cleaning, says the ABS. Data from the bureau due out next year is expected to reflect increased outsourcing of domestic responsibilities, and the greater range of services available - there are now people who'll tackle tasks from walking your dog to visiting your elderly relative in a nursing home.

"Households are increasingly outsourcing as many domestic chores as they can," says Naren Sivasailam, senior analyst with market research company IBISWorld. "This is in line with increasing female participation in the workforce and the busy lives we lead, which have made consumers a lot more time-poor."

Saatchi boss still remembers how the after-school child-care service put her son alone in a taxi to his grandmother's after Sparks missed the 6pm closing by a few minutes.

"Even though you used those services, you actually couldn't talk about it as openly as you can now," says Sparks. "You were perceived to be not a good parent. Having help is much more spoken about now, there is much less stigma."

When Danielle Robertson's mother started Dial-An-Angel 45 years ago, she had to educate people that it was okay to ask for help at home. These days, working mums eagerly swap notes on the best childcare, cleaners, and online shopping offers. Dial-An-Angel bookings have risen 10 per cent in the past five years, thanks to the emergence of the "core competency mom". That's US author Laura Vanderkam's term for mothers who opt to take their kids to the beach over doing another load of washing.

"There is little point in spending time doing things other people can do just as well or better," Vanderkam argues. "It's far better to focus on what only you can do, and what you do best. For working mothers, these core competencies tend to be their paid work and taking care of their kids."

But while Outsourcing Woman is far more realistic than Superwoman, she still hasn't got it totally worked out. Many women find themselves basically working for nothing once they've paid the child-care fees, the cleaner and bought some takeaway. That was the experience of Fiona Lewis, mother of Josh, 10, Ben, 8, and Jess, 3.

"I went back to work after several years off because I craved being back in a professional environment. However, I soon realised that as much as I loved my career, by the time I paid for childcare and help around the house, and also factored in tax and the loss of the Child Care Benefit and Family Assistance as our family income had gone over the threshold, I was working for peanuts."

vices like cleaning, cooking, gardening and babysitting from your tax bills.

Missing the stimulation of work, as well as the income, Lewis found a "happy medium" working from home with an online business, mumpreneursonline.com. She also started a mentoring and coaching program to help women with online businesses. "If I didn't work from home, I'd be paying almost \$1000 a week in outsourcing costs," she says. "Being able to work from home for yourself gives you back control of your work and mothering roles."

Many women work part-time to preserve their sanity, and a study by the University of NSW Social Policy Research Centre found these women spend just as much time with their children as stay-at-home mums. But that's not because they've offloaded the domestic drudge. Rather, they've arranged their working hours around their children and cut back on personal time – getting up earlier, staying up later, forgoing a morning with the hairdresser and enjoying fewer child-free leisure hours – so they can spend more time with their kids.

As much as outsourcing is a lifesaver for working mothers, it's not without its hazards warns Sarah Charlesworth, the acting director for the Centre for Work and Life at the University of South Australia. When the schedule inevitably goes awry – a child is sick, the cleaner gets another job, the groceries aren't delivered on time – it's still generally women who have to come up with alternative arrangements. "Women might be moving away from [doing] domestic labour, but they still have to wear the Responsibility for that."

THE WORK/LIFE BALANCE SHEET

Nicole McInnes

Since starting full-time work, my husband, who also works full-time, and I have employed a nanny two days a week, and our boys spend the other three days at kindy. We get the ironing done once a week, have a cleaner once a fortnight, and luckily our nanny cooks a meal for us once a week. I cook once or twice a week at most, so leftovers and takeaways are regular occurrences.

When the nanny's with my boys, they've had their dinner and bath and are in their PJs when I get home, so I can just play and laugh with them for two hours until bedtime. There's no ordering them around and all that stuff that creates tension. If I could afford it, I'd get a nanny all week.

I miss them and wonder if I'm making a mistake, but I was at an event recently where [television presenter] Melissa Doyle was MC and we talked about it and she said, 'Hopefully they'll feel proud of their mum.' I like that thought. Hopefully they'll also benefit from the confidence and intelligence that comes from me achieving at a high capacity."

Weekly outsourcing costs

Childcare: \$600 (before rebate)

Nanny: \$600

Cleaner: \$55

Takeaway: \$50

Ironing: \$25

TOTAL: \$1330

Jen Dalitz

Mother of Ethan, 3

"I run my own consulting business as well as a working cattle farm, and chair a not-for-profit educational board. I love my career, and after the birth of my son, it seemed in some

Currently, we spend more than my salary on childcare and outsourcing. Fortunately, my husband accepts that this is necessary for the well-being of our family, but because the farm is a new business it's been a really hard slog.

Outsourcing costs are the single biggest expense outside of our business loans. In January, we moved from the city to a farm in the NSW southern highlands, largely to reduce child-care costs: we now have three days in Bowral at \$70 per day, and two days in the city at \$123 per day. We also have an au pair to help with housework, meals, shopping, errands and ironing, and I use a virtual personal assistant for things like organising birthday party invitations. It's hard, but it's impossible to ignore both the investment I've made and the enjoyment I get from my career.

I do get judged. Historically, a good mother is one who does all the housekeeping and childcare herself, and that's the big social pressure. But I just want the same rights and responsibilities as husbands. There's still very much that double standard."

Weekly outsourcing costs

Childcare: \$456 (before rebate)

Au pair: \$100

Virtual assistant: \$250

TOTAL: \$806

SERVICES FOR HIRE

Who are the mother's little helpers making work/life balance an achievable goal?

Gourmet Dinner Service

gourmetdinnersevice.com.au

What Frozen and chilled meal delivery.

How much About \$125 a week (five nights a week at \$25 a night for four people).

Janel Horton, Owner

"We do all the hard bits that busy mums don't have time for - the planning, shopping and cooking (our head chef has a Michelin-starred background). Then we snap-freeze the meals and deliver them to the customer's door. We're basically doing what mums used to do years ago - making two portions of casserole and freezing the rest for later! So all mum needs to do is finish the meal off by adding the fresh vegies and serving it. Mums actually don't mind doing that little bit of work, because it makes them feel like they're being a better mother and taking responsibility for the meal."

How much \$66 for two hours, \$23 for each additional hour (regular service).

Joy Vess, Managing Director

"I think if you walked outside and asked any woman on the street what they'll be doing on Saturday, the answer would be cleaning! It's still very much the woman's job and there's no rest, so by outsourcing they get their Saturday mornings back. I think it also brings a bit of peace and harmony back to the house - there's no more screaming and shouting at kids and partners."

Sue's Ironing Service

suesironingservice.com.au

What Ironing, including pick-up and delivery fee (western Sydney only).

How much Approximately \$100 per week for a family of four - 10 items per person at \$2.20 an item, plus a pick-up and delivery fee of \$9.

Sue Hatfield, Owner

"I started doing ironing in 1984 when I wasn't getting enough housekeeping money and I was raising three kids. When my marriage ended in 1989, I just continued with the business. For most working mothers, the last thing they want to do is come home and iron for three hours. The small amount of spare time they have, they want to enjoy with their families."

Find a Dog Minder

findadogminder.com.au

What Dog walking and minding agency.

How much \$90 a week on average (\$15-\$25 per walk). Additional services – including collecting and sorting mail, watering the garden, "poop scooping", feeding, administering medication and a security check of the property – cost \$5 each.

Alex Bedwani, Director

"Our demographic is 80 per cent female, and 70 per cent of those women are over 40. I think that's because women run most families. Also, more mothers are getting back into the workforce because they need the extra money. They would much prefer to work a job they enjoy, and then pay someone to do the domestic jobs they don't. We have a few high-profile clients who, from time to time, will outsource the dog for the working week."

Dial-An-Angel

dialanangel.com

What Home, aged, child and family care.

How much Before- and after-school care costs \$165 for three hours. Domestic help costs from \$144 for three hours, which includes cooking, ironing and shopping. Pet care costs \$88 for two hours.

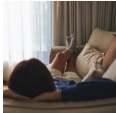
housekeeping, ironing and cooking. People – mothers in particular – are so time-poor and they're so relieved to have an angel come into their home and make it sparkle."

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