Women in the United States have never had it so good. Women have entered the workforce in large numbers; they have entered the sciences, become university professors, deans and presidents, the last in rather astonishing proportions (half of the presidents of Ivy League universities currently are women).

The public world is changing, pushed forward by legislation and institutional action. The private world of the home, however, remains largely mired in tradition. And what a ditch that is. A recent study at Stanford University shows that despite women's considerable gains in recent decades, women scientists do nearly twice as much housework as their male counterparts. Highly trained, highly talented women scientists at top US research universities, like Stanford University, do 54% of the cooking, cleaning and laundry in their households; men scientists do just 28%. This translates to more than ten hours a week for women and to just five hours for men. The Stanford Clayman Institute for Gender Research study singled out scientists, but the patterns we found are familiar across much of the academic and professional worlds.

Doing more housework does not mean that top-flight women work any fewer hours professionally than men. Both men and women scientists at research institutions across the country are on the job nearly 60 hours per week.

Who is doing the housework is not really about women. It's about keeping the United States competitive as a global leader. Why do we in the United States invest considerable resources to
train women scientists (the social investment in one PhD is extraordinary), when these women end up doing housework? Is this the best way to keep us competitive and creative globally? Take a Nobel Prize winner, Carol W. Greider, for example. When the call came from Stockholm early last October morning, she was not working in her lab or sleeping. She was doing laundry. Is this really something the United States can afford?

There are solutions. And they are really very simple: employers need to provide benefits to support housework to all employees, men and women, partnered and single. US employers today offer a number of specific benefits for health care, day care, and sometimes even housing and college tuition as part of compensation packages designed to attract the best employees. We recommend that a benefit for housework be added to that list. It should be considered part of the structural cost of doing business.

At the same time, housework needs to be professionalised in the same way that child care has been taken out of the home and professionalised in day-care centres over the past 30 years. This will create better paid jobs for professional house-cleaners. Professionalising household labour helps to reduce illegal employment. While US employers do not typically offer housework benefits, Swedish companies do. And the Swedish government is currently experimenting with tax relief on domestic services, believing that, despite initial costs, Sweden will benefit in the long run by creating new jobs and reducing illegal employment and exploitation in services for cleaning, gardening and cooking.

US society has witnessed half of a revolution with respect to women. From the 19th to the mid-20th century, professionals were predominantly men with stay-at-home wives who organised and cared for the household. As women have entered the professions, in large numbers since the 1970s, the workplace is slowly being remade to fit also women's lives. We now need to remake the home. In the United States, housework has never been represented in the nation's GDP. Cooking, cleaning and doing laundry remains invisible labour carried largely out by women behind closed doors and often in the wee hours of the morning. This work needs to be lifted out of the private sphere of the family and put on to the national grid. The United States needs to capture the talents of its professional female workforce for mind-boggling advances and creativity. At the same time, women and men who work as house-cleaners should be well paid with secure employment.

Given the economic downturn, this may not be the right time to argue for expanding employee benefits. Our proposal, however, addresses long-term problems and long-term solutions. Providing benefits to support housework continues the dominant social trends of the past 40 years: US institutions have stepped into the domestic sphere to support the work-life balance, from health-care benefits to child-care supplements. Institutions now need to step in to support housework. If you ask what the United States workplace will look like in the next 20 years, benefits for housework will be part of the picture.
Successful women already have a plan. To manage a household and remain scientifically productive they are outsourcing, or employing others to help with core housework, defined as cooking, cleaning and doing laundry. At each academic rank, women scientists outsource twice as much as men scientists. Despite significantly lower salaries, junior women professors outsource the same proportion of domestic labour as senior men. Senior-ranking women outsource the most, at fully 20% of their basic housework. For these women, employing others to assist with housework does not equalise divisions of labour, but it does somewhat lighten their share, and it shaves off almost four hours from the total weekly household load.