

Gender Division of Labour and the Invisible Work of Women: Production vs. Reproduction

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Abstract

Work is considered to be a separate entity from one's domestic or social life, as something people are paid to do, usually for a set number of hours per week or month. The separation of men's and women's work between the labour market and the home has evolved historically. Feminists' interest in work has concerned with what they refer to as the division of labour; the allocation of work on the basis of sex; women's and men's work both at home and in the paid workforce. The present article significantly highlights women's full-day labour as an undervalued and unseen work in the household and society and the changing relationship between production and reproduction. Based on the theoretical backdrop of the gender division of labour, this article focuses on the assessment and understanding of the invisible work of women in industrial society. In advanced industrial societies, work is traditionally associated with production, with the production of goods or services for exchange in a market, in contrast to consumption, which is defined as a non-work or leisure-time activity, whereas at work we exchange time and labour power for a monetary reward. Work is portrayed as a male realm, in terms of numerical and power dominance, and as the arena in which masculinity is produced, while the feminine sphere is the home and family. From the above analysis, it can be safely determined that the question of whether capitalism requires the subordination of women, or whether historically capitalism has facilitated the entrenchment of male dominance, remains disputed as this question cannot be resolved without some reference to the relations between the sexes at different historical periods and in different modes of production. It is argued that women's status as workers has recently declined. The precise interrelations of production and reproduction, in any general terms which can be applied to different situations, remain elusive. But a considerable body of knowledge now exists on specific interrelationships of production, reproduction, and women's oppression.

Keywords: Division of labour, Work, Women, Production and Reproduction

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Introduction

Feminists' interest in work has been concerned with what they refer to as the division of labour; the sex-based allocation of work; women's and men's work both at home and in the paid job. The sexual division of labour cannot be defined just in economic terms because it includes sexual and symbolic components, and it is not forced on individuals but is part of a social package in which it is portrayed as normal, natural, and desirable. It is inextricably linked to our identities as masculine and feminine beings. The division of men's and women's work between the labour market and the household has changed throughout time. Chris Middleton, 1988, demonstrates that patriarchal forms of labour division predate industrial capitalism rejects the idea that patriarchy is an autonomous structure, and emphasises how ways in which both gender and class relations are historically constituted and interrelated in specific places at set times.

The human capital theory proposes that an individual makes an investment in himself/herself by devoting time to studying, gaining additional qualifications, acquiring skills and work experience and that the higher the initial investment in human capital, the higher future earnings are likely to be. This is supported by evidence of broad earnings distribution. However, wage disparities, particularly between men and women, are often much larger than theory would predict. As a result, human capital theories can only provide a partial explanation. They are also fundamentally sexist because they only count production as skills that the market rewards, while many skills possessed by women go unrewarded and unrecognised. To explain these points, we will go over the following division of labour theories. *Dual Market Theory*, the name implies, is the initial and simplest dual labour market model that distinguishes two labour markets, a primary and secondary sector. The former provide high wages, good working conditions, job security, and advancement opportunities. Jobs in the secondary sector, on the other hand, are typically low-paying, overly supervised, with poor working conditions and little opportunity for advancement. The majority of women work in the secondary sector, which is thought to be one of the reasons for their lower pay. However, this model lacks precision because there are obviously many men on the periphery, while there are also many women nurses, teachers, and other professionals, for example, in primary labour markets. While on the other hand, radical economists have provided a more dynamic interpretation, highlighting the process that forms a *Segmented Labour Market*, implying that separate labour markets emerge as employers strive to divide and control workers from one another. They claim employers turned to control-oriented techniques in response to working-class militancy. They do this by separating the workforce into multiple parts so that workers' real experiences diverge and the foundation of their shared resistance to capitalism is destroyed. As a result, labour markets are fragmented by gender, age, race, and ethnic origin. This perspective makes room for understanding gender as important to labour market structure, rather than just as a reflection of men's and women's different family relationships.

Work is regarded as a separate entity from one's domestic or social life, as something people are paid to do, usually for a set number of hours per week or month. Work is frequently perceived as the polar opposite of home; it represents the public side of our daily lives, as opposed to the more private or intimate side shared with family and friends. In advanced industrial societies, work is traditionally associated with production, with the production of goods or services for exchange in a market, in contrast to consumption, which is defined as a non-work or leisure-time activity, whereas at work we exchange time and labour power for a monetary reward. Work is portrayed as a male realm in terms of numerical and power dominance, and as the arena in which masculinity is produced, while the feminine sphere is the home and family. This does not imply that women are missing from the office and men are absent from the home; rather, it states that work is fundamental to building male identity while home and family are essential to creating the building of male identity while home and family are essential to the creation of femininity. Thus, men see themselves as breadwinners in their families, whereas women see paid work as an extension of their roles as wives and mothers, a secondary activity in their lives.

Women's work: Production vs. Reproduction

Accounts of the construction and manipulation of masculinity and sexuality in the workplace were published in the 1980s, Cockburn, (1983, 1985) and Game and Pringle (1984), among others, looked at the ways in which a segregated workforce was defended not only by managers but also by the male workers, while new technology was constantly changing the content of men's and women's work, and threatening to break down the existing division of labour. Therefore, while the sexual division of labour was always changing, what did not seem to change was a distinction between men's work and women's work, and the power differentials between them. Braverman (1974) argues that new technology was degrading the dignity of work, taking away old craft skills and drawing more and more workers into the ranks of an enlarged proletariat, also says that the proletarianization of clerical work is dominated by women. Changes in the organization of work should not be treated simply as technological innovations based on capital's search for higher profits. They are, rather, the outcome of struggles for control between capitalists and workers. Game and Pringle (1984), argue that work is centrally organized around gender differences, and that gender is not just about differences but about power. The power relation is maintained by the distinction between male and female jobs. Male workers have a vested interest in maintaining the sexual division of labour, and in maintaining a sense of themselves as superior to women. They have traditionally done this by defining their work as skilled and women's as unskilled, thus setting up an association between masculinity and skill, Game and Pringle consider the relationship between gender identities and technological change, and ask, what happens when mechanization takes place? They argue that men's skills are seen to be built into the machines and that there is a conscious association between machinery, especially big machinery, and is thought of as appropriate for men. Linda McDowell (1992) says

that the impact of recent changes in the two areas of women's work, the labour market and the home or community and argues that women although still depicted as *secondary workers*, are an increasingly important part of the labour market in the United Kingdom. The increased centrality however runs counter to the greater demands being imposed on them as *caring and servicing* workers in the home as the welfare state is restructured, and seems to be having the effect of increasing the overall workload for many women in the United Kingdom in the 1990s. Selma James and Mariarosa della Costa (1972), focusing narrowly on the factory, argued for wages for housework, while others argued that this would only confirm women's employment in the domestic spheres. Socialist feminists were more interested than radical feminists in *women and employment* which are not given the traditional socialist emphasis on the emancipation of women through their incorporation into socialized production. Feminists of all shades, liberal, socialist and radical, supported anti-discrimination legislation and equal opportunity programmes.

Investigating the role in the production and reproduction of western housewives, clarified women's work elsewhere in the third world and in some parts of the advanced capitalist societies, women were shown to be directly engaged in productive labour in the course of their domestic work. This has been shown particularly in the case of African women but there is also evidence from all other parts of the world to show women's contribution to food production, processing and distribution, care of livestock, craftwork, and community development (Slocum: 1975; Rogers: 1980; Bujra: 1986, Roberts: 1984). Once women were identified as workers rather than as wives and mothers, the extent and variation of male dominance around the world has become much easier to recognize. Social distinctions between men's work and women's work concealed divisions in access to land, knowledge skills, and other resources, the control of labour, and rights to dispose of what was produced. By making women's unpaid labour visible, feminists could show how this work had become devalued as compared to that of men, the distinction between arguments which apply to all capitalist societies everywhere and those which are specific to particular capitalist societies at particular historical periods hasn't always been carefully drawn. Work on production and reproduction in the third world brought home, the need for much more careful qualification of generalization (Redclift:1985). In the 1980s, historical specific knowledge has been produced of the complex relationships that women experience in the processes of production and reproduction (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Balbo, 1987). The gendered structure of the capitalist labour market ensured a sexual division of labour at work. Women have become less valued as workers than men as women had always been accessing to a more limited range of work whereas men benefited from this situation and played a part in maintaining it (Cockburn, 1983). Some of the Marxist feminists argued that women were a reserve army of labour available for work outside the household where insufficient men were available, the problem with this view is that women in advanced capitalist societies are a pool of child labour rather than a reserve army of labour in the sense intended by Marx (Bruegel: 1979). Mary (1976) Women in advanced capitalist societies remain a contradictory form of cheap

labour since when they are in paid work, they still have to be maintained and have several rights, rights to housing, health care, education, pensions, etc., even though these rights are being rapidly eroded. Women's cheap or part-time labour rarely replaces men's more expensive or full-time labour directly because of the extent of gender segregation in the labour market. Women's work is oppressive with respect to their levels of payments and the conditions of work as there is a limited choice of work available for women; they lack access to skills and male activities in the home and the workplace that ensures women don't leave the domestic sphere without the struggle (Burman, 1979; Cockburn, 1983; Westwood, 1984); Work, status and rewards became linked to the relative power of men and women in the home, and women's responsibility for children. The impact of technology and domestic labour then occurred in ways which have reinforced rather than relieved women's responsibility for domestic labour (Ravets, 1987). Making women's oppression through work visible made the connections between production and reproduction clear, but left a number of problems in explanations of how and why these connections had come out and how and why they vary. Nicholson (1987) suggests not a characteristic of all societies, but a historical development that led liberals to differentiate the family and the state, and the Marxists to differentiate production and reproduction.

Once feminists turned their attention to what women actually do both inside and outside the domestic sphere, it has become clear that most women live a life of more or less unremitting toil. Although Feminists established housework in capitalist societies as an area of unpaid labour to be given serious consideration, at first in empirical and historical studies (Oakley: 1974) and then in the much more abstract domestic labour debate taken up by the Marxist feminists. Women's work in the domestic sphere has shown to be much more than private housework. It was revealed as a work of social and economic importance and was shown to have a place in the systematic oppression of women (Kaluzynska: 1980). Feminists used the Marxists' concepts of production and reproduction in an effort to include women's work in producing babies, cooking, cleaning and emotional support, as well as their paid labour while the conceptual separation of women's work into production and reproduction encouraged knowledge of women's work in both spheres (Edholm et al., 1977).

The 1970s conception of reproduction was one of the more abstract and contentious areas of Marxist feminism (influenced by the work of Althusser) as it was very difficult in specifying how the ideologies of sexual subordination interacted with the organization of production and reproduction, while Marxists analysis should be applicable to any modern production, and some feminists have taken up this point. Marxist feminism has tended to concentrate particularly on common features of women's oppression in western capitalism. Women were not only workers inside and outside the home but also physically reproduced and reared the labour force of the future as mothers within families. Marxist feminists have seen women's oppression in the

family, homosexuality, and marriage, as did radical feminists, as well as in the production system and with reference to the activities of the state.

The concepts of production and reproduction established women as workers on very different terms for men. Studies of work exposed the unequal sexual division of labour, both inside and outside the household, not as having its own history and ideology. Questioning the dualism of the private and public domains led directly to the need to re-conceptualize women's work, both at home and in the public sphere. The nature of the work allocated to women could not be separated from their general subordination to men. Feminists began to re-assess concepts of work and in particular, the idea that '*real work*' took place outside the home in organized productive activity. Women's work at home, in servicing the needs of the household and reproducing the labour required for production became visible.

The Changing Relationship between Production and Reproduction

From a feminist perspective, women's large-scale and permanent entry into the labour market poses a great challenge to the orthodox arguments and the circumstances of 1980 have cast doubt on the necessity of domestic labour, whether for capital or for individual men. The disappearances of the family wage in the economic transformation of recent years mean that fewer men can afford to support the services of a full-time home-maker, and capital has discovered that the exploitation of women's cheap labour maintains profit levels; the overall amounts of domestic labour in the economy can be reduced without disaster. Male workers seem able to still perform their tasks without a cooked breakfast and ironed clothes, although it's women who continue to perform the vast majority of the tasks of domestic labour. By definition, women who work for wages have less time for other tasks; but on a larger scale, change has also increased capital's indifference to what goes on in the home.

The state, unlike capital, is increasingly reliant on women's unpaid labour in the sphere of reproduction and this is clearly seen in the movement towards *community care* rather than institutional provision, for the elderly, disabled and terminally ill. The welfare state and the benefits system in Britain continue to depend on idealized gender divisions in a nuclear family that no longer exists. This dependence on women in the welfare sector has been strengthened in a decade when changes in the economy increasingly have challenged it. This contradiction between restructuring in the spheres of reproduction and production has so far been contained by greater inputs of female labour to both spheres but the consequent *social speed-up* is not infinitely extendable.

The association between the industrial organization and the institutions of social regulation is being recast in the post-Fordist era in a contradictory way, placing gender relations at the centre. Women's labour power is an increasingly important element in both the arenas of production and

reproduction while capital has resolved the contradiction between the short-term needs of the economy for cheap female labour and the long-term needs for social reproduction, in favour of the former requirement. At the same time, the state also withdraws from the latter area. The resolution of this contradiction so far has been at the individual level, by the purchase of goods and services for reproduction in the market by an affluent minority and by an increased reliance on the labour of individual women in almost all households. The competing and contradictory needs and interests regarding women's role in the home and in the labour market, create new cleavages and scope for new alliances. Any economic analysis that ignores the centrality of the gendered division of labour, and issues of housework, child care and the support of expanding dependent population, is an inadequate explanation of the nature of contemporary industrial restructuring nor can such an analysis point to the way to a political understanding of how such restructuring may be challenged.

Women's Work in the Home: Household work and invisible work

Domestic labour has a timeless quality as a work that women have always done, but obviously, it changed dramatically. The idea of the *housewife* staying home and caring for the house, husband and children is essentially modern, few women before the twentieth century had that option other than the affluent who has domestic servants. However, whether less time-consuming or has become widely debatable, one thing that seems not change is that women, even if the contributions of other members of the household have changed, even though most biological function as childbirth has been affected by technology shifts in decisions about number, timing and spacing children have affected child care responsibilities. While technology today does much domestic labour, expectations of home dimension personal fulfilment have new set meanings, instead of being *hard work*, has set sexual, emotional and symbolic significances. Nevertheless, there are indicators that the time spent on housework by women in the paid workforce is falling as husbands and children do not seem to be picking up more, but women are doing less (Hartmann: 1981).

Feminist strategies analyzed the interrelations of the family and production in capitalist societies. It was crystal clear that inequalities at work were related to inequalities at home. Women's waged work was constructed as secondary; their wages were seen as pin money; often their paid work was regarded as an extension of what they did at home, in office, as wives, at service and caring work. However equally, inequality at home was linked to their employment options. And without equal access to jobs and childcare provision, a woman has little choice but to locate themselves primarily as wives and mothers. Recent changes in the economy and in the welfare sector raised the question of the extent to which contemporary capitalist societies are still based on the old model of an accommodation between capital and patriarchy. Socialist feminists tended to see the world as a bargain between men and capital, based on support for the traditional nuclear family in which wage-earning male members of the family are serviced by the domestic

labour of a home-based woman. Socialist feminists may have to re-evaluate theories about the links between the family and the welfare state and between capitalism and domestic labour.

Caring and Servicing Work

A central element of the social construction of femininity is that women are naturally equipped to love and care for children and other family members, which unites almost all women in their servicing and caring function of men of their own class and race. This servicing work is also a central element of relations between mothers and their children while in turn it is considered natural for daughters to care for their ageing parents, increasingly in an ageing society, women as daughters are shouldering a great deal of care and responsibility for their elderly parents. These lifelong obligations, to care for husbands or partners, for children and for elderly parents have been dubbed the *tricycle of care*. An additional set of relations of dependency and obligation for women and their relatives are being enforced by policies to encourage the community care of elderly people and people with disabilities. Thus women's unpaid labour is increasing at the very time when they are needed in great numbers in the labour market, again adding to the workload of those women who cannot afford to purchase replacement goods and services in the market.

The Domestic Labour Debate

The problem of how to conceptualize housework in capitalist societies where it was not productive labour in Marx's sense of the term *housewives* produced things or services to be used, rather than things which produced surplus value; and where housewives were not exploited by employers; did not receive a wage for their work which was less than the value of what they produced, led to the domestic labour-debate (Benston: 1970; Gardiner: 1976). Part of this debate was a consideration of whether housework was articulated with the capitalist mode, in part, the domestic labour debate was the consideration of the usefulness of housework to capitalism. Since domestic labour cannot be a mode of production in a Marxist sense, though, this argument changed the meaning of modern production which leaves the meaning of articulation between capitalism and a domestic mode of production unclear.

Questions about domestic labour led to the conclusion that housework existed in the forms because it served the needs of capitalism. Unfortunately, this conclusion is logically flawed and takes no account of variations in forms of domestic labour as the capitalist system can operate without housewives through the use of immigrant labourers living in dormitories at low levels of subsistence, but at the cost of losses in consumer spending. These views are quickly criticized as the position of the twentieth-century western housewife is much more clearly understood as a historically specific and highly contradictory phenomenon which has both advantages and disadvantages for the maintenance of capitalism.

The question of whether capitalism requires the subordination of women, or whether historically capitalism has facilitated the entrenchment of male dominance, remains disputed as this question cannot be resolved without some reference to the relations between the sexes at different historical periods and in different modes of production. Lewenhak (1980) argues that women's status as workers has recently declined. The precise interrelations of production and reproduction, in any general terms which can be applied to different situations, remain elusive. But a considerable body of knowledge now exists on specific interrelationships of production, reproduction, and women's oppression (Afshar, 1985; Mies, 1986).

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