

that the Western women's liberation movement had fallen into the sexist trap of undervaluing the role of the woman in the home. In an effort to secure rights in the paid labour force, they said, the movement had inadvertently sabotaged its own chances of building a mass base both in the industrialized countries where the majority of women are still working full-time in the home, and internationally, where the majority of women, especially in the Third World, are working 17-hour days in the home just trying to ensure bare subsistence for themselves and their families. One woman from Latin America pointed out that the vast majority of women who want paid employment have domestic work as their only option, with pitifully low pay. She described the life of Third World women as being "housework-intensive" both in the home and in the paid labour force, a fact which I think also holds in the industrialized countries, with a difference only in degree and the variety of forms it takes.

In industrialized countries such as Canada and the U.S. the welfare rights movement of the '60s and early '70s was the cutting edge of the struggle to recognize and compensate mothers for the work of raising the next generation.

An early pioneer of the movement, Johnny Tillmon of the National Welfare Rights Organization in the U.S., summed up its political philosophy with the words, "If I were President, I would solve the so-called Welfare Crisis in a minute and go a long way toward liberating every woman. I'd issue a proclamation that 'women's work' is REAL work; in other words, I'd start paying women a living wage for the work they are already doing — child raising and housekeeping. Housewives would be getting paid too ... instead of having to ask for and account for money they've already earned. For me, women's liberation is simple. No woman in this country can be dignified, no woman can be liberated until all women get off their knees."

Dependence entrenched

In Canada the influential National Welfare Council recently took a stand with welfare mothers as "victims of one of the cruelest and most senseless myths of our society: that the person who stays in the home to raise the family is not working."

Grassroots women's and anti-poverty organizations have mobilized for substantial increases in the "family allowance" paid to welfare mothers basing their claim on the fact that women in the home are part of the productive forces of this society. At a recent demonstration on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, one welfare mother was holding up a sign which expressed the new militancy around housework: "Give us a wage, not a allowance. We are workers, not children." "Raise our money or we raise hell," said another.

"Housework intensive"

The impact of the powerful welfare rights movement can be measured by the shifts in government policies. For example, the Parental Pay scheme in Sweden (1974) provides 90 per cent of either parent's wage for the first eight months of the baby's life and it was recently extended to include full-time housewives who are now entitled to \$250-a-month for the first nine months of the baby's life. Such programs embody the principle fought for by welfare mothers and extend them to women in traditional marriages, thereby removing the stigma that welfare mothers are "parasites" or "charity cases." They give dignity and universal recognition to any woman (or any man) who is doing the work of raising the next generation of workers.

Again, the Western women's liberation movement has been largely blind to the significance of the struggle for welfare rights, a pioneering struggle led by black and minority women for whom *survival is the basic issue*. Recognizing the economic value of women's work in the home is no pious abstraction — welfare is the difference between feeding your children or sending them to bed hungry; leaving a violent marriage or suffering random and daily abuse; saying no to a sweatshop or enduring a double workday for miserable wages. In the 1980s, with inflation crippling the standard of living of many middle-class women and their families, and the growing consciousness that every woman is only a man away from welfare, the politics of many women's organizations are beginning to change. The fact is that women's liberation is fundamentally a question of money, of access to the wealth in society which we help create but have always been denied. And in order for that to be a practical proposition for the

overwhelming majority of women, especially in the Third World, it means recognition and pay for work in the home.

In conclusion, both in the developed and developing countries, women's unpaid work in the home constitutes a vast, invisible, and unacknowledged layer of productive work upon which the global economic edifice rests. Women everywhere pay a cruel price for unpaid servitude in the global kitchen; we pay with poverty, over-work, dependence on men, and some of us pay with our lives.

The current debate on the value of housework and the accompanying changes in all the operative definitions of economic justice and social development are an index of the power that women have built internationally across lines of race, class, and nationality. We have come this far in the past decade — we must press on.

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Exchange

'You women are lucky,' he says. He's been spending the summer building a machine to monitor radium implants. The hospital hired him because an engineering student for four months is cheaper than a ready-made machine.

'It's so easy to cure cancers of the cervix, uterus and breast.' With his machine.

First time I've ever heard him say breast instead of boob: he's becoming quite scientific. Talk of wombs scares him. Uterus he can manage.

Because he knows his machines well, the tubes and wiring, how to cancel one death with another, cancer with cobalt. He doesn't worry that no grass will grow around his section of the hospital.

'Yes,' I tell him. 'I hear testicles and prostates come out easily too.' Aiming to deflate.

Emotional. He keeps smiling, knowing I can't easily part the essential from the inessential won't even have my ears pierced.

Lucky to be a woman. We disassemble so easily.

Merle Wallis Bolick