

The Global Kitchen: A Speech on the Value of Housework Debate*

Judith Ramirez

Les femmes sont mal appréciées, surmenées et mal payées dans leurs cuisines

It's 1981, and I think we can safely assume that all over the world this afternoon there are women who are cooking, and cleaning, and standing over washing machines or by streams, women who are gathering firewood and fetching water, looking after children, sick people and old people, and that in all the countries in which they are carrying out these activities they are not regarded as productive members of society.

They are working alongside men who are building roads and driving tractors, but they are not rewarded economically like their brothers. We live in a world which views women's work in the home as a merely private activity which occurs outside the marketplace; women's lives are shaped by this fact, development theories are based on it and national economies — both capitalist and socialist — have it at their foundation. The position is succinctly expressed in the observation that 'a male worker laying a pipe to a house in the city is considered to be economically active; a woman carrying a 40 kilo water jar for one or two hours a day is just doing a household task' (*Impact* 11/79).

Until recently, the only acknowledgment of housework in discussions of development and economic productivity worldwide has been its lack of acknowledgment. In the United Nations' 'State of the World's Women Report', 1979 it states: 'The long busy hours spent in the home where the new generation of workers is reproduced, fed, clothed and cared for are not quantified as work whether in the developed or developing countries. And in many parts of the developing world, women's work in caring for the family extends beyond the home into other productive activities, particularly subsistence agriculture, which are not considered statistically because national statistics cover only the commercial sector, omitting the subsistence economy where the bulk of women's work is carried out.'

This failure of the world economies to recognize the economic worth of

women's work in the home has devastating consequences. Women receive only one-tenth of the world's income though we perform two-thirds of the world's work — *1/10 of the income for 2/3 of the work*. On a worldwide scale, women in the paid labour force work twice as many hours as men because they have the 'second shift' at home. Women make up 60 to 80 per cent of Africa's agricultural work force, and the average working day of a typical rural African woman is 17 1/2 hours. In the developed countries, such as Canada, where technological advances presumably make it easier for the woman in the home to perform her work, studies reveal that the full-time housewife is still spending an average of 13 hours a day doing housework. For this work women receive not a penny.

But a further consequence of this massive deployment of women in unpaid work is ghettoization in the paid labour force. Everywhere we see women segregated into female job ghettos which are low-paid extensions of women's work in the home. We find women in food production, domestic work, textiles, cleaning, service work, teaching, nursing: all occupations related to the care and nurturing of others. For this work, even in advanced countries like Canada, women earn only an average of 60 cents for every dollar earned by men. And in countries where women have broken through this job segregation and have entered occupation which are traditionally male, such as construction or medicine, we see that the occupations themselves have been devalued. According to a 1976 ILO publication, *Women Workers and Society*, ... 'occupations which are on the decline with regard to pay and prestige mysteriously become suitable for women even when they were previously considered heavy, morally dangerous, etc. ... on the other hand, jobs that are regarded as having a future very quickly come to be considered "men's work".'

The social effects of this massive devaluing of women's work and

women's labour time can be seen in relation to both malnutrition and illiteracy. Of the world's 200 million children suffering from malnutrition, the girls are by far the worst victims. Because boys are valued as future bread winners, they are better fed than their sisters. More of the family's resources, however meager, are invested in boy children. When I was growing up in southern Italy, right after the war, this was very much in evidence. The effects of the war had, of course, been devastating on the lives of ordinary people and when we sat down at the table, the meat and other substantial food would go to the men, who were earning — or trying to earn — a living for the family. Next in line for the good food were the boy children, who were expected to take up where their fathers left off, and very often to work at their side even while very young. The women and girls made do with what food was left.

Of the 700 million illiterate people in the world, a full two-thirds are female. Illiterate mothers, transmit illiteracy to their children, especially to their daughters, who are bound up with them in the work of caring for the family. The working partnership between mothers and their daughters, especially in underdeveloped parts of the world, is very strong. As a child, I remember all the women in our neighbourhood getting together every three days when the water would come in the neighbor's house. They would line up to fetch the water and each woman would fill every last bucket and pail that she owned and she would invariably call on her daughters playing in the street to help in transporting the water. Similarly, where a family could only afford to send one child to school and pay for books, clothes, etc., it was always the boy who was picked first. Even the girls who made it to school often dropped out because they were needed at home to help their overburdened mothers. And on a world scale, particularly in underdeveloped countries, this remains the dominant pattern.



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The emaciated baby girl (left) and the sturdier baby boy are twins: the difference in their conditions is entirely due to the boy being nursed first, his sister getting what was left over.

This state of affairs is both reflected and perpetuated in the theory and content of development strategies internationally. For example, since development programs are for the 'economically active', and care of the family is considered non-economic in nature, the needs of women as food producers are ignored in agricultural development planning. Recently, the Economic Commission of Africa said, 'While the global community cries out against possible starvation of millions unless food production and distribution are improved, Africa's food producers, the women, continue largely to be ignored.' On the other hand, the cash-crop system of agriculture which is fostered by development planners is geared to men; it pays them wages to produce agricultural products for export. Very often, the women have to work alongside the men for no pay of their own, simply as appendages to the men, and at the same time, continue to tend the plots of land which produce food for the family. The technology which is introduced with these development schemes also favours the men: 'Tractors, for example, can shorten the work of the men who do the ploughing and lengthen the hours of the women who do the weeding' notes a recent issue of the *New Internationalist*. This greatly increases

the cumulative workload of the women and, because they receive no remuneration for their work on the cash-crops, it further entrenches their dependence on the men. Development for these women means a *greater degree of social and economic powerlessness*.

Similarly, 'modernization' schemes, understood as concentrated investment in urban areas to the exclusion of rural ones, lead to massive male migration from the countryside to the cities, leaving the women behind with sole responsibility for the family. 'The mobility of men in search of employment and education leaves women with the full burden of the family. From Cape Town to Tunis, millions of women have experienced what it means to be father, mother, husband, wife — even though they are not widows...' (*Impact* 11/79). This, of course, is one

White widows

of the most prevalent patterns in underdeveloped countries where 'the towns and mines forgot she existed when they planned the one room for her husband to live in, and bath and cooking facilities to be shared with other men. His wage does not take his seven children back home into consideration' (*Impact* 11/79).

When I was growing up in Italy's underdeveloped south, one of the striking features of our village was that it consisted primarily of women, children and old people. Most of the men had migrated to the north of the country or other parts of northern Europe or Canada. The wives of the men who never returned were called 'white widows' and there were many.

The same pattern on a world level — that is, concentrated development in the north to the exclusion of the south — leads to massive emigration from Third World and underdeveloped areas to the industrialized centres such as Canada, a pattern which invariably locks both the women who are left behind and those who migrate with the men to the industrialized world into domestic servitude. In my work at Toronto's Immigrant Women's Centre, I see this all the time. Women call or come in for counselling who are completely overwhelmed by the enormity of the workload and the isolation the experience of immigration entails. They become the only buffer between their families and the new unfamiliar and often cruel environment.

In the hierarchy of needs within the family, the husband comes first, the sons second, the daughters third, and the mother last, always. This is

reflected in government policy. Paid language study, for example, usually favours the 'bread winner', the 'head of the family', the male. So the woman is disadvantaged if not entirely forgotten. When you look at her total workload, both within the home and in the lower, poorly-paid rungs of

Female job ghettos

the job ghettos, you see a punishing double workload which doesn't allow her to take advantage of whatever other resources are available for language study. For example, if the local high school offers classes in the evening, these women are much too exhausted to take advantage of the 'opportunity'. And their society places restrictions against them being out after dark. When the Third World moves to the metropolis, then what women meet up with in the first instance is *more underdevelopment*; the basic pattern which prevailed at home is now recreated and reinforced to the benefit of the new country's economy.

We can see thus the global kitchen at work, the worldwide pattern of harnessing women to unpaid work in the home and then to low-paid work outside in developed and developing countries alike. Even where progress is evident in development theories and strategies, such as in the 'basic needs' approach, women still remain largely untargeted as producers because their major role is in child-bearing which is, of course, defined as 'unproductive'. A recent study titled 'Women-Headed Households: The Ignored Factor in Development Planning' (1978) documented the growing number of women-headed families in the Third World: 35 per cent of all households in many parts of the Caribbean, 59 per cent of which reported 'no income'. The study concluded that 'recent international data lead us to believe that these women's families constitute a major section of the poor in all countries (be it in Central and South America, in sub-Sahara and North Africa or Asia) and that they may well be "the poorest of them all"'. (*The Unesco Courier* 7/80). A similar study in Canada conducted by Statistics Canada in 1976 shows the same reality: 42 per cent of families headed by women live below the poverty line and a third of all low-income families are headed by women.

Against this backdrop, the current international debate on the value of housework measures the impact that 10 years of the women's movement



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In rural areas of the developing world, women are responsible for at least 50 per cent of food production in addition to tasks of cooking, cleaning, washing and looking after their families. For these women, a 16-hour day is not uncommon.

has had on society's basic definitions of 'work', 'value', and 'productivity', definitions which have always excluded and obscured the worth of women's contribution to the world economy. Traditional definitions of work which limit it to 'paid activity' are now under review. In a special HEW (U.S.A.) study titled 'Work in America', work is defined as 'an activity that produces something of value to others'. This considerably broadens the scope of what we call 'work' in our society and places it in a social context. The study concludes that 'the housewife is really working, whether she is paid or not. She is being productive.' Viewing housework as 'real work' and as part of the productive apparatus of our society completely redefines the role of half the world's population in the global economy, and points to a fundamental redistribution of the wealth

between men and women, between north and south, between town and countryside — with the accompanying revolution in these relations of power.

In recent years, the United Nations has called on all countries around the world to include housework in the Gross National Product. In Canada, this trend is reflected in government studies such as the Statistics Canada study 'Estimating the Value of Household Work in Canada' (1978), which begins with the following preamble: 'Given society's demands for a price tag on housework, it is well that national income accountants react more positively than has been the case in the past. Social purposes will be better served now with a slightly more serious effort to grapple with this problem.' This first study estimated the value of goods and services produced in the home at about 35 to 40 per cent of the Canadian GNP which stood at \$95 billion that year. That puts the value of household work at between \$32 and \$38 billion, which works out to approximately \$6,000 per family annually! The study also concludes that two-thirds of that work is being performed by women, and only one-third by husbands and children. In every Canadian home there is a woman subsidizing the Canadian economy by thousands of dollars every year, though in the eyes of her family and of society at large, she is considered the 'dependent' one, with no pay and no benefits, no time off, no pension, a non-worker, an unproductive appendage to her husband.

Double workload

In a less technical study by the Federal Advisory Council on the Status of Women in 1978 titled *Five Million Women: A Study of the Canadian Housewife*, similar conclusions were reached. The housewife with a family of four was said to produce \$9,500 a year in goods and services, which again works out to an average of \$6,000 per year per Canadian family. When that study was released, a grassroots women's organization, the Wages for Housework Campaign, launched a media campaign to test public reaction. It was interesting to note that most the women interviewed on television, on open-line radio shows, and in the newspapers felt that the figure of \$6,000 a year was much too low for the amount of work and the effort that housework requires of them. And single women also said they felt entitled to money for housework, pointing out the enormous

and growing gap in wages between women and men — a gap which is, of course, compensated for in the home after 5 p.m. A single man can afford to eat out or have his laundry done professionally, the single woman comes home to cook and clean and wash, thereby subsidizing her low wages with her own unpaid work.

Women subsidize economy

On an international scale, notions of development which see women as unproductive appendages of men are now being challenged. In the recent report published by the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, 'North-South: A Program for Survival,' they say 'Plans and projects are designed by men to be implemented by men on the assumption that if men, as the heads of households, benefit from these projects women and children will benefit too Any definition of development is incomplete if it fails to comprehend the contribution of women . . .' What I call the 'sexual trickle-down theory,' that is, if you give money to men it will automatically benefit the women and children has been shown time and again to be completely inaccurate. When agricultural development is geared to cash crops, for example, it is the men who are given the wages even if their wives are working longer and harder. The men, therefore, decide how that money is spent, and very often it is not spent for the basic needs of the family. The women are put in a position of double jeopardy; they do the household work, they do the agricultural work alongside their husbands, but they receive absolutely no money for either of those jobs and are left with the burden of somehow providing for the family.

I was in Copenhagen, Denmark, for the United Nations Mid-Decade Conference on Women which had as one of its many objectives to review world progress on 'recognition of the economic value of women's work in the home, in food production and in other non-remunerative activities.'

Pioneering struggle

The root of women's economic disenfranchisement was recognized by delegate after delegate as being society's complete failure to take into account the worth of women's work in the home.



United Nations

In a workshop I held at the NGO Forum titled 'Should the Government Pay for Housework?' representatives from many countries attended and Third World women, in particular, expressed concern 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 that 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 we 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 feel 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 an 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 principles fought for by welfare mothers and extend them to women in traditional marriages, thereby removing the



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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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Wages for Housework Committee

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