

Housework Under Capitalism

I've worked laying sod, painting cars, selling donuts, and flipping burgers. I have also lived and felt the invisibility of being "only a mom." Nothing compares with the stress of looking after small children, cooking for them and cleaning up after them. Housework gets no recognition, no status, and is the most wearing job I have ever done.

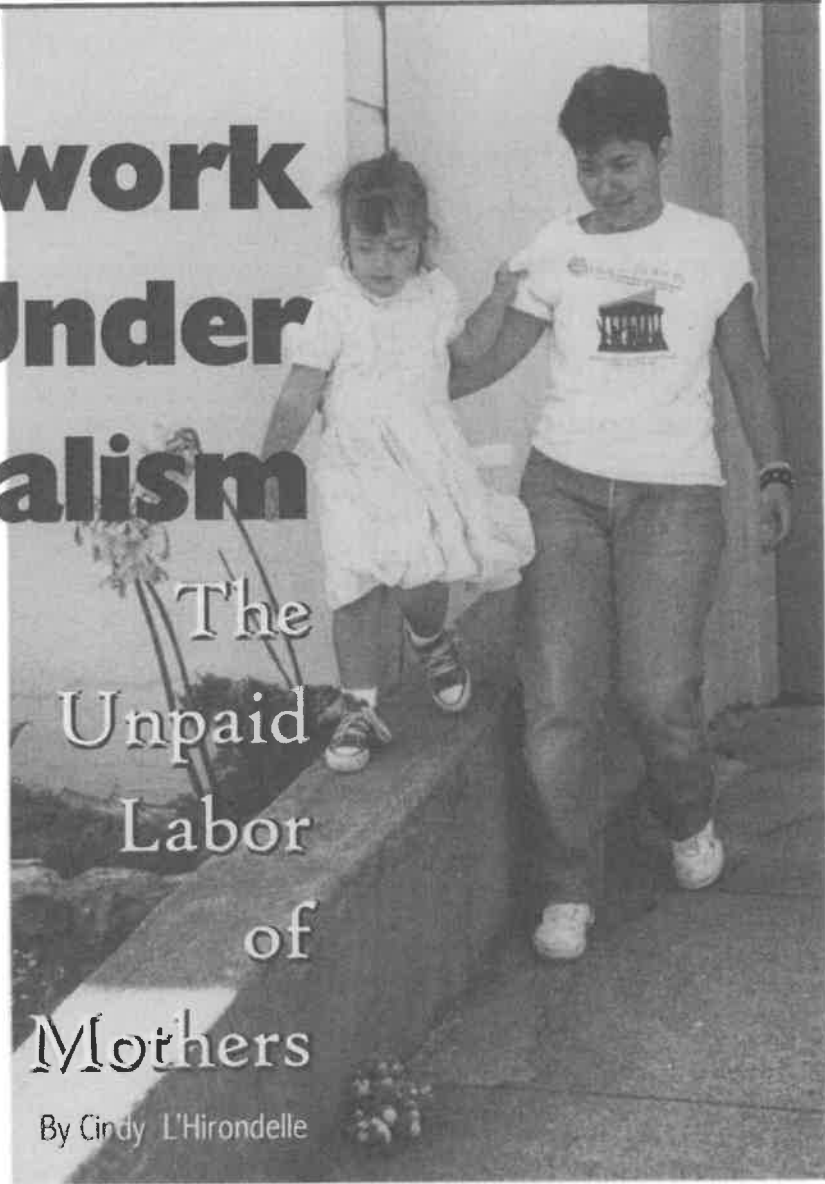
But the subject of household labor is seen as dull, and gets ignored even by progressive groups. Paid work gets recognition: it is "real" work. Yet the most common, exhausting, and tedious work is done for free and is invisible to those who fight against capitalism for social justice. As an anti-capitalist activist, I have attended countless meetings and protests, read stacks of alternative magazines—but I was unaware of the role that domestic labor played in the larger economic picture.

I found my first book on the subject at a closing-out sale in a feminist bookstore in Victoria several years ago. It was the cheapest book on the discount table at one dollar. The book, *More Than a Labor of Love* by Meg Luxton, examined three generations of housewives in Flin

Flon, Manitoba. Even though I was intimately familiar and often exhausted by domestic labor (I am a single mother with three kids), I had never understood its significance. Capitalism is built on the backs of unpaid workers all over the world. Most of these unpaid workers are women and most of the unpaid work takes place in the home.

Domestic labor does two things: it reproduces humans—thus labor

power—and it prepares workers to go to work daily. Canada estimated in 1994 that the value of housework, if it were paid, would be \$318 billion. The variety of jobs you must do when you look after home and children are endless: cook, maid, launderer, health-care provider, mediator, teacher, counselor, secretary, transporter of children and household supplies, etc. All this work goes on quietly, unheroically. Many



The
Unpaid
Labor
of
Mothers

By Cindy L'Hirondelle

women who toil away for no pay are ground into an early grave through the physical exertion of bearing and raising children while struggling against squalor, disease and poverty.

But we probably think of ourselves as workers only when we work outside of home. This was evident during an interview conducted by the historian Susan Stasser for her book *Never Done*. Stasser said an 88 year-old woman told her she could not believe that her unpaid work (as opposed to her "jobs") could have any importance to a historian.

One of the first women to challenge the view that domestic labor was not productive work was Maria-Rosa Dalla Costa, who wrote from Italy in 1972 that the housewife and her labor was the basis for the process of capital accumulation. Capital commands the unpaid labor of the housewife as well as the paid laborer. Dalla Costa saw the family as a colony dominated by capital and state. She rejected the artificially created division between waged and unwaged labor and said

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that you could not understand exploitation of waged labor until you understood the exploitation of unpaid labor.

Other feminist writers have criticized this viewpoint because it does not acknowledge that men directly benefit from having women work in the home. Heidi Hartmann writes in *Women & Revolution* that white union men early in the 19th century wanted women, children, and non-whites out of the work force because their presence lowered wages. They asked for a wage for men high enough so that their wives could afford to stay home and tend to the house and children. Hartmann sees this as a collusion between workers and capitalists. In this way, white men kept women home for their own personal benefit, and bosses—who realized that housewives produced and maintained healthier workers and future workers—got more docile workers. So the family wage cemented the partnership between patriarchy and capitalism.

The tradition of women working for free in the home, and men working for household wages out, has changed. Most men do not get paid enough to support a family. Most women now have paid employment.

But, as Ruth Schwartz Cowen notes in her book, *More Work for Mother*, while the tasks that women do in the home have changed, the time spent on domestic labor has not. This is partly because domestic workers today are held to higher standards of cleanliness, have more cleaning appliances, spend more time as consumers (approximately 8 hours a week buying and transporting goods that were previously delivered), face greater pressure to provide enriching experiences for their children, have less help from adult relatives, and not nearly enough

help from male partners. When both male and female household partners have full-time jobs, the woman still does significantly more housework than the man—15 more hours per week, totaling an extra month of 24-hour days each year.

As a single parent, I find myself trying to comply with two incompatible demands by society: 1) be a good mother and, 2) not be a leech and earn a living. So I do both in a compromised way. It is extremely difficult to be a good mother when you do not have enough money to do the job. It is extremely difficult to earn a living when you are trying to competently raise healthy children.

In *Feminist Issues* (Fall 1992), Reva Landau warns women that the consequence of leaving paid work for a few years to look after kids are lifelong economic penalties through missed promotions, training opportunities, and pension contributions. Men who have a female partner working in the home have an unfair advantage over women in the workplace, who do not have a free laborer at home tending to their needs. If men refuse to do their share of domestic work, women must go on strike. This is the idea behind the

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Global Women's Strike, started March 8, 2000 (www.globalwomenstrike.net). It is estimated that women make up 52% of the adults on this planet and do 75% of the work required to maintain 100% of the population.

Organizers of the Global Women's Strike assert that whoever is doing all this work has real power

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to effect change. But, as Maria Mies acknowledges in her book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*,



there must be solidarity between women in overdeveloped and underdeveloped countries if we want to make this change: "If one set of women tries to better its material condition as wage-workers, or as

consumers, not as human beings, capital will try to offset its possible losses by squeezing another set of women."

Unfortunately, an underlying theme of some feminist literature seems to be that 1) women should have the "right" to exploit

other workers, becoming overpaid capitalists, and 2) children should be mass-produced in daycare centers. Allowing both men and women an equal opportunity to be an oppressor is not a solution. Warehousing

children so that parents can do jobs that exploit other people is not a solution.

Women who provide

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all this free labor in a capitalist system in which nothing else is free must stop being so nice. It makes us tired. And the logical consequence of being too tired is no special extras in the home and no volunteering at the school. Perhaps all volunteers should stop working for free, as it is the logical consequence of living under a market dominated value system. The only free work done should be revolutionary work. That includes raising aware children. All other free work only strengthens a system that is killing us and the planet.

Those who are most oppressed by the rules and rulers should "work to rule"—do the least amount of unpaid work as possible, then strike. In British Columbia we are organizing a series of Womyn's Walkouts, based on some of the goals of the Global Women's Strike, with the demand to do away with the punitive and starvation-level welfare system and replace it with a universal guaranteed livable income. (See article on this topic <http://pacificcoast.net/~swag/guaranteedincome.htm>.)

Unpaid labor is a taboo subject because acknowledging it would undermine one of the most important ideological foundations of capitalism. The owning class does not want to admit that they can only prosper by not paying for seventy-five percent of the true work of the planet. ♦