
International Affairs

Capitalism Cannot Set Us Free: Exploring Women's Responsibilities of Domestic and Public Labour

August 15 2023

Sidney Worden

The presence of women in the domestic and public workforce has historically been used, and continues to be used, as a source of marginalization. The responsibility of women to provide free domestic labour, in addition to being poorly treated and poorly compensated for public labour, intersected with the marginalization of race, demonstrates that women's labour has never been and is not currently liberated. The lie that capitalism tells us, that women's domestic labour should not be compensated, and that public labour is a form of liberation, will never be truly uncovered unless we generate conversations about the rights of women and how their labour continues to be undervalued and exploited.

The responsibility of women to provide domestic labour with no compensation is a well rooted historical idea. The maintenance of the domestic unit, such as cooking and cleaning, has historically been completed by women in service of the male workers, so that they may return to their work fed and refreshed.

Female family members are not compensated for their care of the bodies and environments of male workers; it is expected.

One would assume that by placing the care of male workers in the hands of female domestic labourers, that that would place women in some sort of powerful position, as the maintenance of the working economy rests on the fact that men are fed and cared for. The reality could not be more opposite. The domestic labour of women is vital to the maintenance of the economy, and at the same time, is deemed to have no economic value. The work of women in the domestic sphere is viewed as unequal to the work of men in the public sphere; one being worthy of compensation and the other not. This unbalanced relationship continues to persist between gender and labour today. Today, women make up two thirds of the world's unpaid labour with no end in sight. It remains in the interests of the power structures to maintain the work of women as an inherent

responsibility rather than legitimate labour worthy of compensation.

Now it would be careless to examine this issue without commenting on the ways in which racialized women are disproportionately affected by the issues of women labour. Domestic services can be bought and sold, often in the form of housekeeping, cooks, and nannies. This work is worthy of domestic compensation as long as it is being provided by a stranger; if the services are provided by a family member, then they are done for free. However, women of colour, because they operate under a systematic financial and social disadvantage, often are shouldered with the responsibility of providing both unpaid and paid domestic labour. Low paying jobs and domestic labour services are disproportionately occupied by women of colour. A detailed study of domestic labour in New York found that 95 percent of jobs are occupied by people of colour, and 93 percent by women.¹ Women, most often women of colour, immigrant women, or lower-class women, are expected to provide domestic labour for their families, as well as the economy.

Now that the issues of unpaid domestic labour and low-wage labour have been discussed, the myth that high paying jobs for women is the ultimate form of liberation must also be discussed. Capitalism perpetuates the idea that

money operates as a form of freedom, and to some extent it does. There is no denying the freedom and privilege that money provides under capitalism is something everyone reaches for. However, the ability to participate in compensated labour does not grant women complete liberation, it simply allows them to operate as another cog within the violent wheel of capitalism. Throughout the history of western capitalist society, labour has been advertised as a freedom or privilege. The arguments against the abolition of American slavery asked “What will the slaves do if they can not work? They are uncivilized and I provide them meaning with their labour”. The world wars saw the movement of women into factory jobs and once the war was over, women demanded that they continue to work, because they thought that to work was to be free.

Nobody in the working class is free under capitalism. Capitalism maintains power by perpetuating the lie that we oversee our own destinies, that if we work hard enough anything is possible. So, when women asked if they too could work as wage slaves to the system, capitalism said “yes of course”. The privilege of those few women who occupy positions of power, who sit on vast amounts of wealth, does not negate the oppression that working women and women of colour experience at the

hands of capitalism. The right to work does not make us free, it makes us cogs in a system that does not value or properly compensate our labour.

The question is, where do we go from here? Richard Breen and Lynn Prince Cooke write in *The Persistence of the Gendered Division of Domestic Labour*, that the persistence of women's responsibilities in the domestic sphere are a result of the ways in which family units perform gender. ² The legitimizing of social arrangements through the performance of gender roles because we know no different. They propose that a shift in these gender roles may increase the disbursement of unpaid domestic labour. Is the goal to reassign unpaid domestic labour? Is it to compensate women for their domestic labour? Is it to liberate women and the working class from the shackles of capitalism? Perhaps the goal can be all three, but I believe that it is vital that we continue to have conversations about the short-term solutions that can alleviate the oppression of women while still keeping an eye on the long-term goals of complete liberation.