

Women's Work

By Selma James

The Wages for Housework Campaign has always spelled out the connection between the unwaged and invisible work of women, and the work, waged and unwaged, of immigrants, women and men. We also insisted that those of us who are immigrants, wherever we come from and wherever we go, are attacking the racism and provincialism carefully nurtured among every working class, by bringing another world—usually the Third World—with us into metropolitan centers.

One side of immigration, we said, is that it is an element of State planning—using immigrants to undercut wages, working conditions, and living standards won by the native working class and to disorganize resistance. The other side is how immigrants—as much those from Malaga in southern Spain as those from Port of Spain in Trinidad—use immigration as a method of re-appropriating their own wealth, stolen from them at home and accumulated in the industrial metropolis. Immigrants are in Britain not for the weather but for the wealth, much of which has been produced by their own and their ancestors' labor. That wealth is as much theirs by right as it is of those whose history of exploitation has never left Britain.

The work of women is basic, first, to organizing for themselves and others to become immigrants, and then to transforming their communities from victims of the State plan into a network of reappropriators. But like most unwaged women's work, that work is hidden.

The First Quantification of Women's Work

The International Labour Organization's (ILO) report that women do two-thirds of the world's work, earn 5 percent of the income, and own 1 percent of the assets should end the great debate within the women's movement about why we are (or could be) together as women despite a thousand differences.¹ The work and the poverty of women and our struggle against both constitute the material basis of the women's movement and what we had always claimed is the basis of women's relation to capital—women's exploitation. It's the first quantification of sexism; a tangible measure of just how ripped off women are internationally.² Such a quantification is a weapon against the work. One way to refuse it is to refuse to let it go on unnoticed. We began to publicize the ILO figures.

From the perspective of women's work, all issues are transformed. Take immigration. How much work do women do to make immigration possible, to make possible the rebuilding of the community in a new town, city, country: among other races; speaking other languages; with different foods, dress, customs, education, religions, hierarchies? What is the hidden cost—hidden because women pay it and are not paid for doing it—when the family and community have to confront and survive the economic and social consequences of racism; especially when the woman on whom survival depends may be under attack herself within her own community?

Such questions begin to drag out of the shadows

Photos:

A parade in Beirut, supporting the rights of migrant domestic workers in Lebanon.

Courtesy of allvoices.com

Opposite Page:

(Left) Mothers of the 1950s.

© Clapagaré! (Les chiquitos)

(Right) Many women do strenuous physical work throughout their pregnancies. Fetching wood, India.

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Sex, Race and Class

From a Speech by Selma James



Selma James, a woman's rights and anti-racist campaigner and author, coined the term "unwaged" to describe the caring work women do. That word has since entered the English lexicon to describe all who work without wages on the land, in the home, and in the community. During 1958-62 James worked with C. L. R. James in the movement for Caribbean Federation and Independence and in 1972, founded the International Wages for Housework campaign, which demands money from the State for unwaged work in the home and community. She is the coauthor (with Mariarosa Dalla Costa) of "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community"—an argument for women's unwaged work to be seen as the true backbone of a market economy. In 1975, James became the first spokeswoman for the English Collective of Prostitutes, which pushes for decriminalisation of prostitution, sex workers' right to recognition and safety, and financial alternatives for those forced into prostitution by poverty. James also helped launch Global Women's Strike, an international grassroots network with the motto: "Invest in caring, not killing." —CC

Many years ago, some of us put forward the view that women were absolutely central to capitalist production because the work we did created the whole working class, which Marx calls labor power.

The work of reproduction of the human race is not a small matter although neglected by the market because it doesn't have to pay very much. This unwaged condition is not merely the weakness of women in relation to men in a society where wages dominate, but also one where unwaged women in Africa can grow 80 percent of the food and still not be considered "working" within the economy.

The international market has benefited greatly from this work, especially the work of immigrants, which expresses precisely the power relations between a waged and an unwaged economy. These workers are produced at an even lower cost than the locals because the education and healthcare are not paid for.

Women have had to struggle really very hard for survival, so they became the poorer sex. When the UN said that women do 2/3 of the world's work—and work twice as hard as men—it not only contradicted every single economic statistic quantifying labor and economic contribution, it also quantified sexism. It is the foundation of a power relation which results in all kinds of indignities and exploitation, the most obvious of which is pay inequity.

Pay Equity and Feminist Politics

One of the things that has always bothered me about the women's movement is that when women who work in industry or a job outside the home are asked what they want, their first priority overwhelmingly is pay equity. But if you cast your mind to the feminist campaigns since the late 1960s, the ones that hit the headlines, attract the crowds, and are well-financed are for abortion rights!

I am not a lunatic. I do believe that women should have control of their own bodies and have the right not to have children, or to have the children they want. The fact that women get abortions sometimes when they don't have the money to have the full-term pregnancy, or that sometimes they have children they don't want and are impoverished by it—all of that is based on how much money is available to women. Without question, women need the right to have abortions when they so choose. But if women say that they want pay equity, it seems to me that anybody who calls themselves a feminist should be fighting for that, and not primarily for abortion rights. In fact, if you have pay equity, you can get your own abortion. You have the money to do it.

Why Movements Lose Their Edge

Every single movement for change, including feminism, has thrown up people who inspire or become heads of NGOs, or members of large corporations, or proud members of

government (think Condoleezza Rice and Hillary Clinton). They've risen to the top not by overthrowing the state so much as by joining it, and when we make demands against the powers that be, we are often facing people from our own movements.

A second thing that's happened is that a lot of the movements have turned into NGOs and are no longer directed against the powers that be. Rather, they are directed at ameliorating the situation and making jobs for the people involved. Hence, it seems to me that the reason why abortion and not pay equity has been the focus of feminists has to do with funding priorities.

A third thing is competition. I wrote *Sex, Race and Class* to deal with what I saw as a real problem in the '70s and continues to be a problem today—the competition between movements about who is the most exploited and therefore should get the job. In each of the movements—feminist, black, disability, lesbian—there is room at the top that we all have to compete for. *Sex, Race and Class* tried to make it clear that there was a hierarchy of labor powers that had to do with gender, race, nationality, language, and other inequalities. We are pinned to these categories and have to destroy the whole hierarchy, not just one part of it. It is in our collective interest to look closely at the position of other sectors of the working class to see if we can work together to form a unified movement on the basis of each of us organizing autonomously. ■

This speech was adapted from a panel moderated by Chris Carlsson, who introduced the speakers.

It was recorded at Counterpulse by Shaping San Francisco in March 2012.



the mountain of work, which has defined women's condition, as well as the mountain of work that is assigned to immigrants, particularly if we are Black, always if we are women. For though as women we share overwork and poverty, yet race, immigration and other divides determine what kind of work we do—how much, under what circumstances, and for what returns.

While the UN figures only quantify sexual division of labor, there is also a racial division of labor, an immigrant/native division of labor, and so on, which are rarely quantified. In fact, every division among us expresses the division of labor—the quantity of work and the wages (or lack thereof) mapped out for each sector. Depending upon who we are—the combination of sex, race, age, nationality, physical dis/ability, and so on—we are pushed into one or other niches that seem to be our natural destiny rather than our job. To allow even one aspect of our identity to be denied by anyone—which they do to hide the power relation between us and them—is to allow them to falsify or obscure our social position and our workload.

Work Shapes Women's Relationships

Within the self-proclaimed women's movement, our unwaged work on the land and in the kitchen is hardly a concern for many feminists. The same is true for most political men of every hue and complexion. Neither group includes the tortuous two-thirds of the world's work in their definitions of either sexual or racial violence, though it is both.

Work is not just another issue, one of many ingredients of "oppression," one item on a list of grievances that add up to women's inferior position. It's not just one branch of a blighted tree where each branch has equal claim to treatment in the cause of liberation. Work—the activity women and men are forced to perform to survive—is the essence of capitalism, which must be destroyed root and branch. This work is what saps our time and our energy, which happen to be our life. Work confines us, defines us, and shapes our relationships. For women, to the degree that the work we do is to care for, nurture, train, and nourish others, physically and socially, work is also our relationships. Because work is how we

spend our lives and how we relate, work shapes our consciousness of ourselves and of each other.

Women are seen as naturally low-waged or unwaged servants by men, by society, starting with our own children. The work we do is the essence of our slavery and neglecting women's work has wide implications for every aspect of struggle. For example, without a quantification of

women's work, the case against imperialism, multinationals, and the military-industrial complex, has a basic weakness, a tragic flaw. Why they conquer, what they steal, who they exploit and how much—in the factory, farm, and family, are an incomplete reckoning at best. At worst, such a false reckoning conceals the most bitter truths about one of the two sexes, about the relations between men and women, and about every aspect of politics and economics.

Immigrant Women are Vital to the Labor Force

The neglect of immigrants' work, but immigrant women's work in particular, is a basic weakness of every anti-deportation campaign. The movement has often made the case that because most immigrants are of "working age," those of us who are immigrants contribute more to the economy per capita than natives, who tend to be older; and that they are doing jobs the natives have refused to do. This is true, but it postdates our contribution.

In 1978, three immigrant women's organizations together led the Child Benefit For All campaign to try to prevent the loss of child benefit to immigrant parents whose children were not with them in Britain. The £70 million a year was to be denied to parents who had already been denied their children by immigration procedures and racism. A basic premise of the campaign was that immigrants have always been working for Britain—first in the colonies and ex-colonies, and then in Britain itself—and that work roots the claim for the right to stay and for rights to the Welfare State, not in abstract justice only but in very concrete debts outstanding. Once this work and pain are highlighted, we . . . see that we are owed far more than we owe.³

Women's unwaged work all over the world has produced this army of immigrants. While housework



everywhere is consuming and endless, in the Third World it is generally accomplished without running water, State health care, education, or welfare. Immigrant women came to metropolitan countries precisely to refuse this housework.

Many generations of Third World women have paid heavily so that Britain and other metropolitan countries could have a reserve labor force ready and waiting in the wings, so to speak, for when it is needed. That poorer nations subsidize richer ones by exporting immigrant labor power has been noted before. But that it is women's unwaged work in Third World conditions of economic and technological poverty that has produced this labor power, which is a subsidy extracted specifically from women by international capital, is rarely if ever noted. The State never mentions the work on which it has been so dependent. And neither, in general, does the movement. That women are seen as appendages of men in immigration legislation and threatened with deportation if they lose that connection is directly attributable to the invisibility of their work. It is vital, therefore, that the economic and social foundations laid by our unwaged housework, field work, community work, office work, and much more, in every society, finally be acknowledged.

Make Women's Unwaged Work Part of GDP

Women's unwaged work appears nowhere in any country's gross national product (now called the gross domestic product), which is supposed to quantify the total amount of a country's goods and services. Those who claim to lead us in the struggle against exploitation, including trade unions, seem just as reticent to

mention the two-thirds we do, the 5 percent we are given for it, and the mere 1 percent of assets we own. Women's unwaged work? Hard. Maybe even tragic. But marginal. Unproductive. They should get a job. And so, women (and children) who bear the burden of this work and this poverty are omitted from every consideration of entitlement. Dismissed as much by militant antisexist as by militant anticapitalists and antiracists, and even by those who pride themselves that they are all three.

In dismissing or ignoring the ILO figures, two-thirds of the case against capitalism, sexism, and the racist, imperialist patriarchy is lost; as is two-thirds of the proof that there is a material basis for sisterhood, a basis for common struggle as women and as workers internationally. In particular, the day-to-day struggle of Black women to cut down on this work, and where it is unavoidable, to get it done and still survive remains largely invisible and unrecognized. ■

Endnotes

1. Women at Work, International Labor Office Newsbulletin, Geneva, no. 1 (1980). The two-thirds figure originated in this journal.
2. Capitalist society turns everything, including human skills and abilities, into commodities whose value is quantified on a price tag or in a wage. The degree to which we are exploited is meticulously planned and constantly measured and evaluated in stock exchanges, banks, boardrooms, cabinet meetings—even at foxhunts, over dinner, and for all we know, in bed. In general, men do not work as hard as women. The differences in amount of work, income, and degree of exploitation are quantifiable—so we can measure not only how much we lose but what we can win and frame our demands accordingly. (As a strategy, quantification began with Marx, whose early work described the effects of exploitation and later work quantified this exploitation.)
3. Francis Solveig. "Until Women Have Spoken." Introduction to *Black Women: Bringing It All Back Home*, Falling Wall Press, 1980.

Photo:

A woman cooks food for her family on the roadside in Balochistan Province, Pakistan.

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