The reproduction of difference: gender and the global division of labour

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ABSTRACT

This article starts by outlining the complex relationship between the gender division of labour in the household and the division of labour in waged work, taking account of the social, technical and spatial dimensions of this global division of labour and showing how this contradictory inter-relationship affects both the different value of men's and women's labour and the different positions that women and men occupy in the labour market. Whilst commodification and technological change have brought about shifts between work that is unpaid and work that is paid, as well as between informal and formal employment, gendered patterns continue to reassert themselves. It then goes on to introduce the contributions to this journal issue which illustrate these changing patterns and the questions they raise for future research.

Introduction

It is a phenomenon that takes radically different forms in different contexts, and there is fierce disagreement amongst anthropologists and paleoanthropologists about how and why it originated, but there seems to be little doubt that, wherever human beings have lived together in groups, there has been an arrangement whereby some tasks are performed mainly by women and some by men. This gender division of labour has been reinforced, contorted and challenged by its many interactions with other divisions of labour, whether these other divisions of labour are based on social power relationships (for instance the division of labour between masters and servants), a division of tasks between different occupational groups or, taking advantage of regional economic advantages, a spatial division of labour. With the simultaneous application of technological advances and globalisation, these divisions of labour have become increasingly elaborated in recent years, and, in the process, their mutual interactions have become ever more complex, convoluted and multi-dimensional.

Gender is not, of course, the only variable; it intersects with others, such as skill and education, ethnicity and class background. Nevertheless, the gender division of labour is ever present and, despite over forty years of equality legislation, shows an amazing ability to adapt, survive and re-emerge in new forms when attempts are made

to suppress it. This issue of *Work Organisation, Labour and Globalisation* documents and analyses some of these and reflects on their impacts on the daily working lives of women and men around the globe.

One important starting point for understanding the extraordinary persistence of gendered divisions of labour is the problematic interface between the household and the labour market. This can be argued to affect the different value of women's and men's labour, the different places women and men occupy in the occupational division of labour and the different positions women and men occupy in social hierarchies.

The household is generally conceived as a space in which tasks connected with reproduction, consumption and private enjoyment are carried out without pay and, within their own internal relations of gift, exchange and coercion, among a private group of individuals. It is important to remind ourselves from the outset that this normative conception is culturally constructed and – even in developed Western economies – has frequently been at odds with reality. Households may, for example, consist of single people, large extended families or include non-relatives such as lodgers, servants, foster-children or live-in lovers. The home may also be a site of economic activity, either formally or informally, and act in some respects as an extension of the labour market rather than a separate, counterposed space.

The labour market is conceived as a space in which individuals freely exchange their labour-power for money. The employer selects a worker on the basis of his or her skills, availability and ability and buys an agreed amount of that worker's time. It is not the employer's responsibility, but that of the individual worker, to ensure that he or she turns up on time, clean, fed and suitably dressed, to carry out the tasks assigned for the day, let alone take care of the renewal of the pool of new potential workers (these are taken care of in the household – in the worker's 'leisure' time). Again, the normative idea of the labour market is that it is a space in which both employers, and workers, compete with each other on an equal basis. Differences in workers' skills and abilities, including their abilities to offer their services at particular times or to be free to travel are generally conceived as individual attributes.

Already, in juxtaposing these two concepts, we have a conflict: between an arena (the labour market) formally made up of individuals each of whose labour time is separately paid for, and another sphere (the household) which is (actually or potentially) constituted by a group of people, consuming and carrying out the tasks connected with its own reproduction in a collective manner.

The traditional approach of political economists, enabling them to ignore this contradiction, has been to regard the other members of the household as adjuncts, if not possessions, of its (male) head. Marx and Engels, for instance, regarded the gender division of labour within the household not only as the origin of all other divisions of labour but also as the origin of the concept of private property itself.

The division of labour ... is based on the natural division of labour in the family and the separation of society into individual families opposed to one another, is given simultaneously the distribution, and indeed the unequal distribution, both quantitative and qualitative, of labour and its products, hence property: the nucleus, the first form, of which lies in the family, where wife and children

are the slaves of the husband. This latent slavery in the family, though still very crude, is the first property, but even at this early stage it corresponds perfectly to the definition of modern economists who call it the power of disposing of the labour-power of others. (Marx, 1945, Part 1 A)

From this premise, it was possible for Marx and Engels to conclude that, when machinery is introduced, and muscular power drops in value under capitalism, *[there is an] immediate increase in the number of wage-labourers through the enrolling of members of the family who had not previously worked for wages. Thus, the value of the man's labour-power is spread over the labour-power of the whole family – i.e., depreciated. Now, four persons instead of one must perform not only labour, but also surplus-labour for capital that one family may live. Thus, the degree of exploitation is increased together with the material exploitation ... Formerly, the sale and purchase of labour-power was a relation between free persons; now, minors or children are bought; the workers now sells wife and child – he becomes a slave-dealer. (Engels, 1877:89)*

Although expressed less starkly, it was the same underlying logic that underpinned the 'breadwinner/housewife' model of the household that was prevalent in most developed economies for much of the 20th century and, indeed formed the basis of national welfare and taxation policies in the post-war period. By a kind of sleight of hand, this model renders the individual/group contradiction invisible by subsuming all other household members under the single identity of their 'head'. For many households this model was always a fiction. Some households were headed by women; male wages in many industries were too low to support a family; and some women chose to work even when their earnings were not essential. Nevertheless, it served a powerful role in establishing a norm which established all alternative arrangements as atypical.

By the end of the 20th century, with divorce rates and single parenthood increasing, growing unemployment due to industrial restructuring, a decline in the real value of male wages and women forming nearly half the formal workforce in many developed economies, its mismatch with reality was plain for all to see, and the contradictions it posed for public policy were becoming acute (Pfau-Effinger & Rostgaard, 2011; Drobnič & Guillén, 2011).

Nevertheless, even after over four decades of intense debate and voluminous feminist research, the same contradiction remains unresolved, theoretically, in terms of public policy and in the daily lived experiences of women and men, although there are enormous national and cultural differences in the forms that it takes and the severity of its impacts. This contradiction is that between a 'private' sphere in which labour is carried out for its use value, and a 'public' sphere in which an individual's labour time is exchanged for money, in a world in which the publicly earned cash is increasingly necessary to pay for private consumption and it is the same labouring bodies, male and female, that carry out both the paid and the unpaid work.

The context in which this contradiction is played out is not a static one, in which compromises can be negotiated slowly, and agreed patterns of behaviour that have transmitted down the generations moderated gradually and consensually. It is one where the speed of technological change and global restructuring impose violent

shocks, forcing people abruptly into new behaviours and, in the process, taking away traditional tasks whilst simultaneously demanding new ones. Inherited power relations and roles are disrupted; passed-on skills are rendered obsolete; the rhythms of personal life are dictated by new demands set by employers. It may even be necessary for individuals to migrate to an alien culture on the other side of the world to survive economically, splitting families and creating a spatial divide between the earner's public place of work in the labour market and the place where the reproduction tasks paid for by those earnings are carried out. Such changes radically transform both the domestic division of labour and the technical and spatial division of labour, creating new stresses for both, as well as forcing men and women to relate to each other and organise their personal lives in entirely new ways.

Commodification shifts the boundaries between paid and unpaid labour. As women enter the labour market, paid service workers have to be drawn in to carry out some of the services activities they formerly carried out in the home (such as cleaning and the care of children, the sick and the elderly). Time spent on formerly labour-intensive household tasks can be reduced by purchasing goods in the market, but, simultaneously, new kinds of unpaid 'consumption work' (Wienbaum & Bridges, 1978; Huws, 2003) are created, whereby the unpaid labour time of consumers is substituted for the paid labour of service workers, for instance, through the introduction of self-service and the transfer of transportation and storage tasks from supermarkets to their customers. The spread of information and communications technologies (ICTs) has created new types of consumption work (Oliver, Romm-Livermore & Sudweeks, 2009), enabling the labour of service delivery workers to be replaced by telemediated self-service, for instance in purchasing made online or via call centres, in the phenomenon sometimes known as 'prosumption' (Toffler, 1980; Comor, 2011), or 'Internet prosumer labour' (Fuchs 2010). These new forms of unpaid work have also been dubbed 'citizen sourcing' (Hilgers and Ihl, 2010), 'crowdsourcing' (Howe, 2006) and 'co-creation' (Prahalad and Ramaswamy, 2000; Banks & Humphreys, 2008).

It is sometimes argued that the Internet has created new sorts of unpaid work in other ways too, blurring the boundaries between leisure and work, described as 'playbour' (Kücklich, 2005) and enlisting users' unpaid time to create value for companies like Wikipedia, Facebook and Google through their Internet use (Cohen, 2008; Scholtz, 2011). Some might not regard all of these activities as 'labour' but it is incontrovertibly the case that they take up real time which occupies a position at the boundary between paid work, leisure and housework and could be regarded as subtracting from, or adding to, any one of these. When these telemediated tasks are unavoidable (for instance filing tax returns, dealing with household repairs, paying energy bills or online shopping for necessities) then they belong in the category of 'consumption work'.

The blurring of the boundaries between paid and unpaid work does not stop here, however. As is discussed by Pupo and Duffy (this volume), in the current phase of global capital restructuring there has also been an enormous growth in other forms of unpaid labour including internships and various forms of voluntary work which

substitute directly for paid work on the labour market. Their existence makes it even more difficult to disentangle the complex relationship between unpaid domestic work, and the gender division of labour within it on the one hand, and the dynamics of the division of labour in the market on the other.

Yet another aspect of the interaction between the gender division of labour in the household and the division of labour in the broader labour market is the impact of the former on the relative value of men's and women's labour in the latter. There are several aspects to this.

The first aspect relates to the scarcity of skills, the degree to which these skills are formally recognised and certified and the value that holding them confers on the owner in the labour market. Historically there has been a direct relationship between the scarcity of skills and the ability of the workers who possess these skills to negotiate arrangements to limit access to them (for instance through institutions like guilds, apprenticeships, craft-based trade unions, professional associations or negotiations with the state to limit certain professions to those with formally recognised qualifications). Groups of workers who have successfully managed to organise themselves to control access to their membership in such ways have, at least at certain historical moments in certain particular contexts, been able to achieve a relatively advantageous position for themselves in the labour market and bargain their way into a privileged position within it (see Huws, 2006). By contrast, skills which all women are supposed to possess as a necessary condition for fulfilling their designated role in the domestic division of labour have, by definition, no scarcity whatsoever on the labour market. Regardless of how difficult they may actually be to perform well, if every other woman in the neighbourhood also knows how to carry them out, and in the absence of any other social sanctions, it will always be possible for an employer to access these skills at low cost. This is part (though only part) of the explanation why cleaning, cooking and childcare skills command a low value on the labour market. It is also the explanation why these jobs tend to be carried out by women in both paid and unpaid capacities.

A second way in which the household division of labour impacts on the relative value of men's and women's paid labour time results from differences in time availability resulting from their differing responsibilities in the home. Household members who do not have responsibility for caring for small children or the elderly or providing the family meals are much freer to dispose of their time. This enables them to offer unlimited availability to the employer which in turn, makes it possible for them to trade their labour time for higher wages, for instance by agreeing to work overtime, to travel greater distances in connection with work, start early or work late. Those who can only offer their services within the constraints of, for instance, school hours, have a much poorer bargaining position. This has enabled employers to dictate poorer wages and conditions for the part-time work which is the only employment option for many women with childcare responsibilities.

Important though they are, these two factors do not account for the whole of women's labour market disadvantage, or, for that matter, of broader patterns of occupational segmentation (Wilkinson, 1982). Neither can women's position across a

range of low-paid industries be simply extrapolated from their role in the household. The household gender division of labour can explain why women are more likely than men to work as cleaners but it cannot explain why they are the preferred workforce in electronics assembly plants. To understand this, we have to look to another aspect of the contradiction between the plural character of the household and the singular character of labour market participation.

History suggests that women and children (or at least teenagers) are the preferred workforce for production in any new stage of capitalist development, whether this is textile manufacture in the first industrial revolution of 18th century Britain (Thompson, 1963) or the assembly of silicon chips in Asian free trade zones in the 1970s (Froebel, Heinrichs & Kreye). This development too can be traced back to the contradiction between the household and the labour market outlined earlier. Even if Marx and Engels, in the quotation above, may have been wrong to see this as the result of the fathers and husbands of this new workforce acting as slave-owners, they were nevertheless right in observing that members of a multi-person household can be employed for lower wages than those of a sole 'breadwinner' since their wages do not include the whole cost of reproduction for an entire family. In this respect the employment of women and children contributes to the cheapening of the value of all labour, or at least all labour that is not protected by strong occupational ring-fencing.

The coexistence of collective households on the one hand and labour markets made up of atomised individual workers on the other thus provides strong, albeit contradictory, foundations not only for gender inequality in the labour market but also for the general disadvantage of workers vis-a-vis capital in maintaining the value of their labour.

Such structural reasons are not, of course, the whole story. We must also look to older patriarchal patterns to explain male dominance over women, reinforced by physical force as well as by cultural practices and religious ideologies and also expressed in the division of labour in the form of gendered hierarchies and gendered service relationships both in households and in broader communities. As some of the papers in this collection show, these power relationships too are both challenged and reinforced in formal labour markets.

In hierarchical divisions of labour in the formal economy, for instance, the authority of the boss over the underling, like that of the master over the servant, may be reinforced by patriarchal power. However such relationships may also be cut across by other variables, such as colonialism, class or ethnicity. In times of restructuring, they may be overturned by rapid changes in the relative position of different occupational groups when work is rationalised or restructured, or by the new patterns of confrontation between different social and ethnic groups that arise as the result of globalisation (Huws, 2006b).

It is therefore important to add to the insights from political economy those from other fields of intellectual enquiry, including psychology, anthropology and social and cultural studies, in order to understand the many facets of the gender division of labour and their multiple points of connection and friction with the changing global division of labour in paid work.

Drawing on such diverse perspectives, the collection of papers in this volume illustrates the complexity of these interactions, in the process opening up new questions for investigation in future research.

In the first contribution, Marisa Matias, Claudia Andrade and Anne Marie Fontaine explore the interplay of work and family in Portugal, in a context where, compared with other parts of Europe, there is an unusual combination of high full-time labour-market participation by both women and men with a strongly gender-traditional division of labour in the home. This presents a particularly stark example of the work-family conflict. In examining, through a gender lens, in a psycho-social approach, the strategies that individuals and families adopt to reconcile these multiple roles, these authors shed more general light on the interactions between these spheres and the inadequacy of the public policies that have been developed to address them – inadequacies that are only likely to become further exacerbated in the present economic context. They also show how one solution to the otherwise insoluble dilemma of combining a demanding job with family responsibilities is to employ external help to carry out some of the domestic work.

Pupo and Duffy look at unpaid household work from a different angle, placing it in the context of the growth of other forms of unpaid work in an analysis that reveals the complexity of this under-studied field whilst demonstrating its growth in developed capitalist economies in the contemporary context.

Elisabetta Pernigotti turns the spotlight on the supply side of domestic work in Europe – the other side of the coin examined by Matias, Andrade and Fontaine. Based on in-depth interviews with women providing cleaning and care work in private homes in France and Italy, she examines the ways in which different patterns of informalisation of women's domestic labour have evolved in these two different national policy contexts. In France, the introduction of measures intended to formalise care work have partially backfired, giving rise to new forms of 'grey' work and, by increasing competition between care workers, actually leading to a deterioration in pay and conditions and in the long-term commitments between these workers and their employers. In Italy, by contrast, the work has remained informal but is situated in a 'continuity of informality' which also encompasses other kinds of service work, such as in restaurants. In both cases, the women interviewed had previously held formal factory jobs and had been driven into this kind of precarious family-based work by the impact of deindustrialisation. This study shows the power of gendered patterns of labour market disadvantage to reassert themselves regardless of the presence (or absence) of policies designed to combat them.

Babs Grossman also focuses on domestic and care work, but takes as her starting point the concept of 'emotional work' (Hochschild, 1983) as it has been applied by scholars in this field. Whilst paying tribute to the value of this approach and the new insights that have been gleaned from it, she argues that it is insufficient for gaining a full understanding of the gendered nature of service work in a global economy. A macro-level approach is required, she maintains, at a trans-national level, using the tools of political economy to develop an understanding of the new international division of labour in a manner that integrates the dual logics of capitalism and gender.

Stuart Rosewarne can perhaps be seen as providing an example of just such an approach in his study of 'the perversity of Asian labour exports as an economic development strategy'. His focus too is on domestic and care workers, but these are not the indigenous European women studied by Pernigetti. They are women from the Philippines, Indonesia and Sri Lanka who are actively encouraged to migrate to more developed regions of the world to carry out other people's housework on limited-term work permits. The rationale of their governments for this policy is that their remittances will help the local economy back home, thus making a contribution to national economic development. Rosewarne does not just demonstrate that these policies are unsuccessful in their own terms; he also shows how they contribute to the institutionalisation of gendered labour market disadvantage on the global labour market and lead to a range of abuses – including murder.

Thembi Mutch writes as an anthropologist, presenting the results of a long-term study of women in Zanzibar caught between the contradictory pressures of modernisation and the economic imperatives to work on the one hand, and traditional values on the other. The resulting conflict can be summed up in the quotation 'Even though I work, I am not a whore' used as the paper's title. Whilst unpaid work is a taken-for-granted aspect of daily life, work for money (which is, after all, basically a hiring out of one's body) is still associated with prostitution, attracting strong social opprobrium. Mutch chronicles the ways that women pick their way through this minefield, the contradictions that arise for them in the process and the ways that they make sense of these. In the context of rapid modernisation and globalisation, experienced both through huge influxes of foreign tourists and via the Internet, the question of women's work in Zanzibar stands right at the centre of a collision between traditional gender values and the global political economy.

Also in Africa, Irene van Staveren shines a light on another aspect of gender in the workplace, in a very different context. She studies the position of women in senior government positions in Uganda, during a period when there has been considerable pressure, including from international donor bodies, to promote women to prominent positions in order to demonstrate a serious government commitment to gender mainstreaming. Her detailed analysis of public service personnel data for Uganda casts doubt on the concept of the 'glass ceiling' as it is often used to describe women's failure to rise above a certain point of seniority in organisations. In the Ugandan context, she found a relatively large number of women in senior positions. However at the same time she also found a very big wage gap between men and women, a gap that became larger the higher up the scale the women mounted. She concludes that women 'have to pay' for their promotion by accepting proportionately much lower salaries than men, in a phenomenon she describes as a 'glass ceiling trade-off'. Once again, a situation is described where gender disadvantages resurface, even where policies have been developed explicitly to correct them.

The final contribution to this collection is by Peter Hancock, Sharon Middleton and Jamie Moore. This draws on a large survey of women working in Enterprise Processing Zones in Sri Lanka who, in some ways, exemplify the first-generation industrial workers also studied by Engels in Manchester in the 19th century. Like the

Zanzibari women studied by Mutch, these young women are caught in a conflict between the traditional gender values of their parents and the 'modern' character of the formal labour market. They too are regarded as 'bad' and unclean for working outside the home, subjected to physical abuse and sexual harassment both on and off the job and, as one 'zone girl' interviewed by the authors put it, 'nobody would like to marry me ... because I am a garment worker'. This demonstrates that the attitudes expressed in Mutch's study are not limited to the particular Muslim values of Zanzibar but can be found much more broadly distributed in transitional cultures in other parts of the world. These young women recount daily experiences of humiliation, bullying and harassment both inside and outside the workplace. Nevertheless, these authors – whose research questions focussed particularly on empowerment – conclude that, for the women they interviewed in Sri Lanka, participating in formal paid employment has its positive side too, with their respondents reporting feelings of empowerment and independence and increased self-worth. It is a familiar pattern: on the one hand, in a money-based society, financial independence derived from labour-market participation confers a degree of autonomy which is unavailable to a financially-dependent housewife; on the other hand, this very independence, and the public exposure associated with it, generate new forms of social vulnerability, whilst insertion into the disciplinary structure of the workplace brings novel varieties of degradation.

It is clear that both the household and the labour market can, simultaneously, be sites both of oppression and of potential self-actualisation. These contradictory forces are played out both separately, within the context of particular family relationships and divisions of labour and of particular structures of work organisation, and against each other as they come into conflict. It is perhaps in the interactions between the domestic gender division of labour and the global division of labour that the greatest shocks are experienced, but, by the same token, it is also in these collisions that the greatest potential for change may also be present. The political upheavals currently taking place in the global economy seem likely to be accompanied by equally explosive upheavals in gender relations. What changes in consciousness this will bring about is a question on which new research is urgently required.

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