

The Proletarian Condition of Women

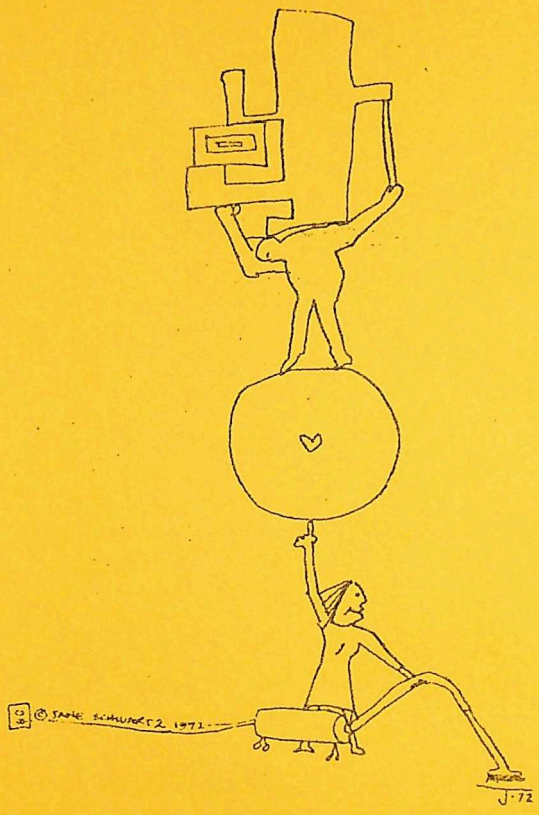
Looking around ourselves as women, we discovered the home, the family structure, as a place of specific exploitation of our labour power. Inside the home we saw our invisible work, the enormous quantity of work that women are forced to perform every day in order to produce and reproduce the labour force, the invisible--because unpaid--foundation upon which the whole pyramid of capitalism rests.

This work, which consists of having children and taking care of them, feeding a man, keeping him clean and cheering him up after work, is never presented as such. It is presented as a mission whose fulfillment enriches the personality of the one who carries it out. A woman is a mother, a wife, a daughter; she is loved only if she is willing to work without grumbling in the service of others for hours and hours, Sundays, holidays, and nights. This labour relationship is seen always and only in personal terms: it is a personal affair between a woman and the man who has the right to appropriate her labour. It is explained continually to the woman that her world is the family and not society: within the family therefore, she experiences the contradictions involved in the division of labour between men and women, which society imposes on her. The housewife has always been excluded from working class organizations, so all she can do is look for individual solutions.

As an individual, for instance, she has had to confront continual price increases. When her man's wages are no longer enough for meat she substitutes potato souffle--which is equally nourishing but takes another hour of work; or she travels to markets and butcher shops far from home to save a few cents on housekeeping. Women, isolated in their homes, have had to bear the main brunt of inflation in terms of more work.

The material reality that binds us to this work is our dependence on a man's wage. This wage not only pays for many hours of his direct labour, it also commands other work which revolves around that wage: that of the woman in the domestic "factory." It is the woman who has to work like mad every day to put something resembling a full meal on the table. No matter what the income of the man she is dependent on, a housewife is in herself always a proletarian. Her social status can vary, but no one has ever thought that a slave was not a slave just because he had a rich master who could guarantee him a higher standard of living than other slaves.

There are very many women who, to escape the curse of inadequate wages and the isolation of their condition, decide to work outside the home as well. But their continued responsibility for the invisible work--within a patriarchal production relation--reveals the true face of the "emancipation of women through work." Only a part of this mass of housewives who "choose" double exploitation are taken into production, and then always at the lowest levels for the lowest pay. And an outside job rarely takes



WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

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Social services are not the ultimate objective of our struggle; still less do they offer a real alternative to the exploited situation we are immersed in. However, even these concessions will not be handed us on a platter -- they can only be won by hard fighting at a high level of organization. And they should be seen as a victory: the conquest of our battleground and better conditions in which to broaden and build our struggle.

The Immediate Challenge

The right to be paid for work one does is something which immediately affects all women; even those who don't figure in the statistics as housewives, even those who are not wives or mothers: the girl living at home who studies or works but is always expected to "give a hand" at home, the "independent" woman with her own income who sooner or later is lumbered with the care of the old, the elderly woman who wears out the last years of her life looking after the children of a younger woman who is thus "freed" for factory work, the woman whose man is "understanding" and ready to help but always makes it clear that by rights she ought to be doing the work, and so on.

The demand for wages for housework is a demand for independence. No matter how many services we manage to win, no matter how much more free time we gain in this way, until we win our own

incomes and thus break the bond of economic dependence on a man -- whether husband or father -- how can we form the relationships we want, decide if we want to get married or not, to have children or not? How can we control our own lives? How many women are unable to leave their husbands today and divorced tomorrow because, although they have worked all their lives, they cannot support themselves and their children?

The demand for wages has in itself an ideological impact. We are looking at our work in a new way. We have been taught to see that work as an expression of our femininity, in which, we are to our finest quality -- generosity -- is fully expressed in giving others security and serenity. The fact that we now see that work as a socially necessary activity, which must be paid for just like the work of fathers, husbands, and sons do outside the home, is already a big step towards achieving an attitude of detachment, towards destroying that naturally fixed role which society assigns us.

The author of this article is a member of *Lotta Femminista* in Modena, Italy. She acknowledges contributions from the feminist conference organized in Padova on the theme of "Wages for Domestic Work" in April 1972.

EVALUATION / CRITICISM OF BRITISH Campaign:

THOUGHTS ON THE FAMILY ALLOWANCE CAMPAIGN

The relationship between the demand for payment for housework and the popular campaign to retain the family allowance paid to women with children has raised a number of problems within the Women's Liberation Movement.

The family allowance campaign was supported by a large number of women's organisations, the Communist and Labour Parties and a number of trades councils.

It raised within our movement a number of questions about our involvement in a national campaign, and the way in which the movement itself dealt with a national demand.

This has to be seen also against a background of a split within the movement over attempts to raise the demand for payment for housework, and "money of our own", demands which were by no means supported by the movement as a whole.

Furthermore, these demands implicitly or explicitly involved rejection of the movement's original four demands, which, however inadequately, attempted to cover the whole spectrum of women's oppression, pay and job opportunity, education, abortion and contraception, and comprehensive child care facilities.

During the course of the family allowance campaign, which was opposed to the Tory Government's attempts to scrap the allowance in its present form and pay it instead to the father in the form of a tax credit, the allowance was taken by some of those who supported payment for housework as a means of fighting for an income for wageless women working in the home.

This resulted in splitting the movement over a campaign which had been initially a united one, by interposing a theoretical position on which the movement was not agreed.

It also led on some occasions to antagonisms between other women outside Women's Liberation who were campaigning

to retain the family allowance.

Fundamental differences of approach to the struggle against women's oppression were also exposed by this split.

The family allowance campaign could have been seen as a means of acknowledging and extending demands for State recognition of responsibility toward successive generations of children.

Thus it could also be a focal point for raising consciousness of the relationship between the State and the family, and for eroding the notion that each family must be sufficient to be responsible for itself.

This could have been a crucially important opportunity to clarify both inside and outside the movement the politics underpinning our movement -- to force society as a whole to socialise the functions of the family as essential progress towards the liberation of women.

Instead, the payment for housework position would simply reinforce the level at which so many women see themselves, and perceiving the family allowance as the "only money of our own," without in any way challenging the restriction of women to a privatised domestic role. It also would fail to challenge the family structure which is a fundamental facet of class society, and acquiesced in the role of women as domestic servants, paid or unpaid.

In a very real way the family allowance campaign could have provided an opportunity of raising through a one-demand campaign consciousness of the totality of women's oppression and the need not to reinforce it by being paid for domestic work.

Rather than this, the presentation of the demand to retain the allowance for women could be seen as perfectly reasonable within capitalist terms, a demand that the unpaid domestic