

WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

This group of writings was produced by women in the Power of Women Collective. We first came together in March, 1973 to discuss "The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community" by Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James, a book with which we were all in sympathy. Women from all over the country meet periodically. For the Power of Women Collective, wages for housework implies a general perspective, not simply an isolated demand. Women who are interested by these papers and would like to discuss them further may do so by contacting either of the following:

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POWER OF WOMEN COLLECTIVE



## Preface

The demand of wages for housework is steadily gathering momentum in the women's movement internationally. Perhaps its most passionate exponents are among those women who have spent years of their lives privately taking care of the physical needs of others, cooking and washing up for them, cleaning up their messes, nursing the sick ones, keeping all on their schedules, servicing them sexually and/or psychologically. They represent the hundreds of millions of women who are isolated in dreary, repetitive tasks, doing heavy as well as boring labour--with or without machines to help--and on top of this are taken for granted.

In the last four of five years many studies have been done to measure and evaluate the unwaged work of the housewife, whose labours have never been computed into the GNP. Different estimates have been published of the number of hours of work and the money value they represent. The greatest significance of these studies (and one function of the demand itself) is that through them all of us come to recognize that housework is work. Not a duty and service of love, but work on which the whole economy rests. We learn that housewives are not doing "nothing," that they are not "only housewives" (with a suggestion that they are parasites on people who "work"), but that they are working. And some of them damned hard.

But there are other aspects to a demand, however popularly it may speak to the needs and the rage of the oppressed and exploited housewife. An objection that is sometimes expressed against our movement's articulating the demand of wages for housework, against assisting its concretisation, or against even supporting it when others raise it is that such a demand would "institutionalise" housework.

It is hard to think of a species of work which is more institutionalised than housework already is. It is even more institutionalised than factory work. For girls are trained from the cradle to fill the role of housewife, to create an identity on the basis of this fate, so that their submersion into housework will appear as the natural and inevitable outcome of their lives.

Women are rebelling against this "fate" as never before in history. There have always been subtle rejections and evasions of the role, but now there is a militant chorus of women who say "NO! Not me." Some of the greatest rejectors, however, oppose our movement's espousing the demand of wages for housework because, as they say, "we don't want wages for housework--we want to obliterate housework!"

On the surface that seems a logical response. But history does not work with such a linear logic. A Ford worker would like to destroy the production line that dehumanises him, but he knows he cannot destroy it by refusing wages and working for nothing. Indeed his main weapon is to demand more wages. His factory life is a constant battle to defend his humanity, to increase his power over the work process.

So too a housewife, if she wishes to destroy housework, must first gain that minimum leverage that a wage provides.



But then they say, housework is not only deadly; it is inefficient, badly organised, a waste of human labour. It would be uneconomic, even immoral, to support such a waste by paying it a wage. What we must do is technologize and socialize housework.

The reason housework is "economically wasteful" is precisely because it is unwaged. The system does not care how long it takes the housewife to finish her tasks--she can work 24 hours a day for it--because it is not paying her a wage. If it were paying, there would then be some concern about the "inefficiency" of housework. This has been the response of capital throughout its history. Every technological advance has been a response to the power of labour in its struggles against the conditions of work. The slave-labour mode of housework can be destroyed only if there is a mass unified struggle against those conditions. Before housework can be socialized, the people who work in its pre-capitalist conditions must socialise, must leave their privatised slavery to struggle together. Otherwise their forced socialisation, not springing from their own needs and experiences but imposed from above and inspired by capital's need for more efficient work, will resemble the forced collectivisation that the world has already seen.

But the ramifications of the demand of wages for housework are even broader and deeper. The female role of dependency, the low wages of women who work outside the home, the kinds of work that women are channelled into, all flow from women's wageless (hence powerless) condition in the home. The nuclear family itself has no solidier base than women's economic dependence on a wage-earner.

We demand wages for housework from the State. Not just because there are few wage-earners who could afford to pay a housekeeper (an average of £60/week, according to one estimate). Not because it is the State which benefits from our labour, which it has taken free for centuries. But most important because this is our struggle and we must set the terms of it. We do not ask the State to rationalise housework or passively accept some oppressive plan that they will propose to put on us. We want to be in a position by our struggle to reject something worse than what we have, to create something new, alive, and liberating.

Wages for housework offers independence and the dignity that comes from a recognition of one's efforts. It offers a choice of occupation for one's energies, a freedom to leave housework, to enter into a social, instead of privatised existence (however fancy the prison of the home might have been). It offers women the chance to relate to other people on a fully human level, not as doormat, sacrificing angel, or cannibalising matriarch. And immediately it offers women the sisterhood of waging a struggle together.

Priscilla Allen  
June, 1973



## WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK AND THE SINGLE WOMAN

All women are housewives. That is the role they are brought up to fulfil. Whether they get married and have children and their life consists literally of housework (i.e. keeping house for a man) or whether they stay single (with or without children) does not in any way alter this fact. Single women without children often have difficulty identifying with "real" housewives. They feel they are different because they appear to be independent and free. In fact, in a more subtle way, they are probably performing exactly the same functions for the men in their lives at home and at work and for themselves as the "real" housewife. This is a false differentiation between women which we must get rid of.

As a single woman the fact that we are all housewives was very vividly brought home to me in my last job which I did for two years. As an assistant film editor I worked in a very isolated and claustrophobic situation for one (married) man directly and for several indirectly. There were no other women either in our cutting room or nearby. Making tea and coffee all day was the least of it and a man in my job would have had to do the same. But I was also expected automatically to do other tasks specifically because I am a woman. I went out to buy special foods for anyone who felt ill or had no time, I bought cigarettes and personal provisions at the chemist if they forgot. I swept, hoovered, scrubbed the cutting room with vim from top to bottom, I suspect more often and better than a male assistant. I chauffeured men across town in my car if they didn't know the way. I was expected to keep them company at lunch and dinner if we were working late and they were alone, or know when to stay behind if they were going to talk business or eat with a woman. I was at all times a shoulder to cry on. Work problems, financial problems, personal problems, depression, ill health and sundry grumbles came my way daily in varying doses. All this on top of performing a tiring job efficiently and well and looking good, to add to my boss's status. (Inasmuch as my boss and I were friends, I did of course sometimes confide in him, but more often I held back my own problems.) I often felt that we were as good as married. My boss asked me not to go out with the odd possible man that turned up; he on the other hand felt free to go out with my girlfriends.

But the crunch came for me every night when we eventually went home. All the men would ring up their wives to announce their imminent arrival and ask what was for dinner. They would go home after a hard day's work to hot meals, clean houses, clean clothes for tomorrow and lots more under-standing. I on the other hand would go home, hoping to find a shop still open to grab some food, to a flat I hadn't had time to clean, to dirty clothes, to unanswered correspondence and no energy to deal with any of it till my day off. (I sometimes worked seven days a week and didn't have a day off).

I suppose I should add that I was doing an apprenticeship and learning a trade which is why I stuck it out; but the point is it was an experience which shows very clearly that I was a housewife at work and at home, that I was reproducing (as well as his wife) both my boss's labour power and my own and that all this work was invisible. This is true of millions of women who go out to work.

Housework is productive work which is unpaid. In a nuclear family the wife produces and reproduces labour power (both her own and her husband's). In the case of the single person who goes out to work and has to look



after herself/himself, the person who reproduces the labour power is the same person who sells it. Housework includes shopping, preparing and cooking food, washing up, hoovering and scrubbing the floor, washing and ironing clothes and also the work necessary to reproduce the stereotype female image that is expected of all women who go out to work, i.e. all the work involved in maintaining the appearance of hair, make-up and clothes.

Besides doing their own housework at home, women who go out to work often find themselves doing housework as part of the job they have been employed to do. They automatically work as caterers, cleaners, nurses and as wives, giving emotional and moral support. These services are taken for granted and not paid for because they are part of the work all women do free.

Physical housework is also an expression of emotional support. Because of the dehumanizing nature of capitalist production, housework has the necessary function of making peoples lives more bearable - one's own or someone else's. Looking after people or looking after oneself is work precisely because it enables the capitalist to go on exploiting our labour while only paying for a tiny part of it.

We demand wages for housework for all women, married or single.

Asther Wenny



Personally, I have never wished to be a housewife. I have always felt a drive to project myself, to tackle the world outside, to understand and explain and explore. When I was a child, if we played at being a family, "papas i mamas" we called it, I always was the father and the boys were either my sons or uncles. One summer, the other boy of my own age in the group rallied the others against me and they ostracised me. But later I organised a play with them, and I played the part of Lohengrin, the teutonic knight that goes in a boat drawn by a swan, a boy was the swan and that male rival was the baddy of the plot.

At school (a convent) I was hopeless at everything manual or domestic like sewing or keeping the desk in good order; I was good at Latin and Greek and History. One summer I was reading the books by Camus and my mother asked me to cover the books I brought to the beach to read, she said explicitly that I would put everybody off if they saw the titles. She spent a lot of money and energy to make me look suitable. She succeeded so that I spent my university in a constant jerk from boyfriends to books and vice versa. On my twentieth birthday I made an important decision, it was phrased thus: I shall never laugh again and I shall never have children. I was reminded of this decision when I read Shulamith Firestone's call for a "smiling strike".

Everybody was very patronising at my decision not to have children. Once seeing a film with a friend, I was moved by the story of a child. He immediately pointed it out to me with a wise smile ... It was supposed to be my maternal instinct coming out.

In my work a certain pattern soon became obvious; I never finished anything well. Finally I ran out of the country.

When I married a man three years younger than myself, with a non-academic mind, a devotee of jazz, I felt very proud and showed him off: it was an act of rebellion against what I felt had been expected of me, i.e. to be



the intelligent, dedicated and graceful wife of a brilliant somebody.

By marrying, I left the place and job I had (both I liked), and came to London, convinced that I would find a similar job. Immediately I started looking for it. Very soon it became obvious that by having married, I was automatically dismissed from serious consideration: I was expected to be at home and have children and look after my husband. I spent two years determined not to give up my economic and "personal" independence. I felt like a caged cat, I must have been very unpleasant to live with. Finally I gave up, but not to do housework. I started to be active in the women's movement and to do my own research. I accepted to be paid for being married, I had to in order not to become mad. But the rot with the husband had set in: he had been ready to accept a non-house wife if I had a career, was happy and had a respectable salary. He could see that I was not suited for housework, he agreed with not having children, but all the books and papers and talk around the flat for very little money, he thought it was too much. Once a month he had to remind me that my mind was expanding at the cost of his labour (he does a job that he enjoys most of the time). I tried to get as much free lance work and part-time teaching as possible, determined not to be forced to give up my own projects. We separated six months ago. The work that I've done during those six months is tremendous: which shows that while I was with him I tried not to work too much in case my mind expanded too much...

During my life, especially my married life, I have been made to see that the life of all women, single or married, is conditioned by the identification of women as housewives. Women's lives are basically affected by the social status of housewives. Thus the fight of all women has to be related to the situation of housewives, in fact it is always so, because it questions the "female rôle".

By demanding wages for housework, we point out the contradiction between the present necessity for housework and the situation of women. Housework at the moment is a necessary work for the functioning of society and is tied with the sexual role of women. But the fact is that when women do the housework, they are selling their labour and their life as when working in an office or factory or anywhere else. There is no unavoidable, fatal, biological destiny that makes women housewives. It is capital that has



as created the nuclear family.

There isn't any more a biological destiny that forces women to have children. Single women know this when they decide not to be wives and mothers. But society doesn't admit it. Moreover, housewives by not being able to have economic independence, are cowed into believing that their situation is natural. Fatalism has always been a feature of oppressed people who do not see a way out of their oppression. Therefore there is a division between housewives and women who are not housewives, because the latter questions the fatalism in a woman's life. Often the housewife resents the single woman, she sees her as "selfish", for she has refused to sacrifice herself. Single women have understood that unless the role of the housewife is demystified, they will never be able to have a life in their own right.

It has to be possible for women to refuse to be housewives and this will be so, when society recognises housework as such and pays for it.

An important complication regarding the present mystification of housework is that it is closely tied with the private relationship between men and women. Housework's chores such as cooking, washing a shirt, making the bed, sewing a button, are forms for a woman to express her love to a man, what is more, it is the established, recognised way of expressing the woman's affection for a man, so that the man expects it. If he doesn't get it he feels insecure, uncared for, deprived etc. So that at a certain point in every heterosexual woman's life, she feels compelled to become a housewife for her man. If a relationship with a man extends itself in time, the result is a familiar one: she becomes a fulltime housewife, regardless of her will or other occupations.

Therefore it has been suggested that all women are housewives and that the demand for wages for housework should be extended automatically to all women.

I think that this is an emotional demand, useful maybe as slogan merely. But it would undermine its own purpose. It is of primary importance for the emancipation of women to break that fatalism in a woman's life which makes her either a housewife or a freak. I totally refuse to do housework: I want to do another kind of work. Besides, by being considered the natural way to relate to people for women, it would have the effect of me hating everybody and myself. Moreover, it is time that men start relating to women as people, rather than as self-denying servants or emotional freaks. I do not want to



be paid for housework, for all my life I have refused to do it; I have taken some risks by doing so, by not submitting willingly to the expectations of men and some women that I have had affection for. I refuse sacrifice, "being considerate" regardless of myself. But I have to identify with every woman who has become a housewife because I've realised that in fact there is no real choice. I have succeeded in not being a housewife, but I have not been able to keep the relationship with men I have been involved with and with some women friends who have accepted their female role. I have to fight for the right of the housewife to be paid and thus for her not being taken for granted, because it is a key factor in the emancipation of all women.

If the demand for wages for housework is isolated from the other demands such as control of our bodies, equal pay and equal opportunities, we will fall into a distortion that denies women any hope of gaining a new identity, of conquering their sense of reality. In a movement like ours, of people whose oppression has been so deep that we have a problem of identity, this would alienate most of the other women and would run the risk of sinking women more into their female role, if the demand was granted.

Practical ways of demanding economic independence are appearing: single women into SS, squatting, working women outside the home with equal pay, married women in the newer forms of wages for housework. All these demands are of necessity reformist, but they will show the power of women and establish it. Behind such demands there should be a vision of revolutionary change, of new forms of production, new social relations, new values.

Unfortunately, this doesn't exist with enough clarity in the West. But our situation as women points out an explosive paradox: how in the "affluent" society its female population has been forced into total oppression through the ruthless exploitation of the sexual and emotional lives of the people. Because the oppression and exploitation of women backfire at themen, both in economical and psychological terms. One has to fight on every front of our oppression. Single women need housewives to be economically independent, as women on SS need working women to have equal pay, like heterosexual women need lesbians to be happy, and vice versa.

H. Colombé.



## WHY I WANT WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

I don't work because I like it. I hate it. I work because I need the money, just to pay the rent and buy the food I need to live. One thing about living in a nuclear family as opposed to a communal arrangement is that you need more money just to keep alive.

I work as a typist, mainly copying shit, sometimes plugged into an audio-machine, wires coming out my ears, foot pedalling at the end of another wire, hands thumping the typewriter - and the voice, HIS voice, right inside my head. The most degrading bit is when the voice in my head uses my first name. I don't even know what his first name is.

From 8.30-4.15 every day I've got to forget I'm human - forget everything that makes life worthwhile. Forget what I could be doing, what I'd like to be doing. Worst of all, when the sun's shining. I'm expected, day in and day out, to be there at 8.30 ready to give a full day's labour. No allowance is made for personal problems/depression - everyone may be concerned, even sympathetic, if they know something's wrong - but they still expect a full day's work of the usual standard. And they still expect you to be part of their scene - a cheerful cog in a cheerless machine.

It gets more and more isolating. The effort required to switch from the structure to human relationships gets heavier and heavier. I come home too exhausted to think and find myself forced to relate somehow to the people I live with. Try to put my mind to work on the things I'm interested in. Try to share in the joys of my child growing up, to learn things with her and spend time with her. Try to make, or keep up, contact with real people who think the way I do. That becomes more and more difficult. Everyone has their own life, their own problems. Even in Women's Liberation it's hard to think of myself as part of a movement, as belonging with other women, when my own life means such an individualised oppression. The day's routine, the getting up at 7 o'clock in the night and going to work, coming home to washing up/laundrette/cleaning/cooking - even when these things are shared equally they still have to be dealt with. I know everyone shares these oppressions, but it becomes more and more my oppression, that I have to deal with myself. I know that in emergencies I can call on friends for help, or that in their emergencies I'll help them out. But the isolation, for them and for me, is in dealing with the little, everyday things.

The day's routine leaves me too exhausted, too dehumanized, to make myself wholly part of the struggle with other people to deal with it for once and for all. The struggle becomes internalised and expressed in the need to deal with what's for dinner or who's doing the washing up. And because everything is internalised in that way I find myself using up even more energy inside the family itself, fighting those issues. Or just arguing about nothing.

And it goes on round in my head, all the time I'm at work, that money is the only reason why I do it. Why else should I be enslaved to a wage which, while a good deal better than most, still leaves me without most of the things I need and want? Leaves me without any time for myself, to make relationships, to even think about the things I'd like to do, let alone do them. The only way I can get money is by wasting 40 hours in the week - the best hours at that - working, another 8 hours travelling, and then of course there's several hours more on housework. So that even when I've got time to "myself" I can't use it for myself, I'm just far too tired.



So far, the strength of Women's Liberation has been that women have recognised the problem as universal, discussed it, and tried to help each other out especially at times of particular crisis. It has tried to expose the personal, individual problem as a general, political one. But when it comes down to the nitty gritty of making ends meet and coping with the individual pressure, and oppression, the movement has not found a way of struggling against these problems. All we have learnt how to do is to share them - an essential basis for struggling against them. The demands that have been put forward have not dealt with, or only partly dealt with, the real every day oppression that all women have to deal with all the time. And many of them have become dangerously co-optable by the State as a means of pushing capitalism forward.

Wages for housework is the only thing which for me would begin to deal with all that. I could immediately stop or at least cut down the paid work I do outside the home. Even if I had to carry on doing the housework I do now I would still have 40 hours a week liberated for my own needs. It is the first demand that has put forward the possibility of a measure of personal liberation. I wouldn't have to get up at 7 a.m. I wouldn't have to go to bed early. I would be in a position of picking and choosing what I do with my day. I at least feel that with that demand I am fighting for a measure of liberation for myself - and not just for myself, but for the whole struggle. I would then be free to meet people, discuss, read, demonstrate, or whatever. I could give up that shitty job and just begin to enjoy my time a bit.

Women who do paid work outside the home could give that up. Women who do only unpaid work in the home would have money of their own for the first time. The only way to get out of the house is if you've got the money and the time. And the only way you can feel part of a human movement for total liberation is if you can get out of the house that isolates you and imprisons you and out of the work that dehumanizes you.

I want wages for housework so that I can get out of the house for 40 hours a week, not to bash a typewriter for capitalism, but to be part of the struggle to get rid of capitalism altogether.

Helen.



## WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK AND THE SINGLE WOMAN

We don't want the "right to work," because we already work. I think that equal pay is a demand that doesn't really deal with the fact that we all have our relationship to production determined by the fact that we are women.

Why does a part of the female work force take a second job?

- (1) For money, and
- (2) To avoid going mad (housewives), or
- (3) They're unmarried and waiting to get married, or
- (4) Single women spend all their time and energy just to avoid the fate of housework, i.e. the "career girl."

Some of us (the proportion is bigger in the movement than in the rest of society) --more and more of us--belong to the last category, and will be more motivated to ask for equal pay (and it's right not to tolerate such basic robbery), but it's still a very small proportion of women.

Usually, it all starts with the illusion, shared by men, that there are "interesting jobs" that men keep for themselves, that we are going to get one of them and show them what we can do. All this is mixed with a rejection of the female role, often accompanied with contempt for other women (this has been described many times). At some stage comes the consciousness that there are no "interesting jobs" in this capitalist society worth fighting for. Nor are there for men, by the way, but women have to fight twice as hard, so it ought to be really convincing (maybe that's the explanation why there are so few top business women, top lecturers, top whatever-you-want women).

Making a career, for a woman, means giving up motherhood, maybe giving up a stable relationship with a man, and losing all of her female friends, etc.

And one day you realise that you have been struggling not to get something else, but just to avoid being a houseworker, and that you can still become a houseworker at any time, if you are not careful every day of your life: you might be asked by your family to look after somebody old or ill; you might "fall in love" with a male chauvinist pig (yes, yes, it happens); you might want to have a child.

You are seen as a prostitute by most men you meet at work and you haven't escaped the general exploitation of women through advertising. You are considered a sex object: maybe the little success you have at work is due just to that.

Because of all this, plus unequal pay, even this category of women can ask for a wage for housework: the difference between her wage and that of her male counterpart allows him to pay for the services that a wife would perform free--e.g. he eats in a restaurant.

The woman who earns less money will spend more time just looking after herself--and she will have to spend twice more energy at work if she wants to climb up the hierarchy, or try to conform to the male ideology of work, which serves the system so well. Wages for housework is the only demand at the moment that seems to give a chance to all women to break with that ideology.

S.L.



NINE HOURS A DAY ! : A street song from the 1880's

All thro' this good old land of ours  
Commotion there has been  
And in the poor man's working hours  
Great changes we have seen;  
But while they struggled for their rights  
And to improve their lot  
Our poor white slaves are left at home  
Neglected and forgot.

CHORUS

Then help all the women boys,  
They're the pride of our land we all say  
Then why should our women work  
More than Nine hours a day?

"What can a woman have to do?"  
The men will often say,  
"They only have to cook and stew  
And pleasant pass the day."  
But let a man just take her place  
When baby begins to roar:  
He'll find himself in such a mess  
He'd never try no more.

You would first the children have to dress  
And breakfast get you know;  
There's Tommy standing on his head,  
While Jack upsets the Po;  
There's Sally at the water  
With firewood setting sail,  
While Bobby makes an awful noise  
By twisting Pussy's tail.

At one o'clock the 'Hotter' goes,  
The men come home to dine,  
And if it's not ready done  
Look out then for a shine.  
At five o'clock he's done his work  
And then do the grand:  
While you are slaving like a Turk  
He's singing 'Happy Land.'

You factory girls of England now  
Who get such little pay  
The roses from your blooming cheeks  
Hard work has driven away.  
Oft-times to please your masters  
You are working past your time,  
But if you are late they will shut the gate  
And make you pay a fine.

Young women then take my advice,  
When courting your young man:  
Tell him when the knot is tied  
That this will be your plan--  
Eight hours for work, eight hours for sleep,  
And then eight hours for play;  
Sundays must be all your own,  
And 'night work' double pay.