

THE DEBATE ON WAGES FOR DOMESTIC WORK: A LOOK AT THE 1970S IN ITALY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the theoretical debates surrounding domestic work in 1970s Italy, focusing on the feminist movement's call for recognizing and remunerating this labor. As societal changes, including increased women's education and workforce participation, highlighted domestic work's invisibility and undervaluation, feminists like Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici initiated the International Campaign for Wages for Housework to challenge capitalism's gendered labor dynamics. Using a historical and theoretical approach, this study examines the ideological and practical efforts to redefine domestic labor as essential work and interrogates the capitalist structures that perpetuate its invisibility and unpaid status. The findings reveal that acknowledging domestic work as labor is not only a step toward economic recognition for women but also a critique of the broader social order that devalues reproductive labor. This research underscores the ongoing relevance of these debates, suggesting pathways for further inquiry into the intersections of gender, labor, and economic justice.

KEYWORDS

Feminism, Domestic work, Reproductive labor, Capitalism, Economic recognition

1. INTRODUCTION

Starting in the 1970s, the growth in demand for service jobs, the increase in women's educational attainment, the spread of the concept of emancipation, and families' aspiration for well-being pushed women into the labor market and public engagement. However, this did not mean that women were no longer expected to perform so-called *domestic work* or *reproductive work*, which includes having and raising children, caring for the family, and managing the household—all without monetary compensation. In Italy, this issue was hotly debated, as it challenged the political and economic definitions of *work*. Even in the 21st century, the topic remains relevant, though under the broader concept of *care work*.

This paper aims to analyze the significant political and theoretical debate of the 1970s surrounding *domestic work*, work that did not count as *work* and was therefore unpaid. Specifically, it examines the views of notable feminists such as Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici, founders of the International Feminist Collective, which was established in Padua in 1972 to promote political action on domestic work. Their efforts gave rise to the International Campaign for Wages for Housework (WHC). Additionally, Beatrice Busi, a researcher and activist involved in numerous national projects on contemporary transformations in labor and social reproduction, provides critical insights. Drawing from their experiences and the ongoing relevance of this issue within feminist debates, it is essential to trace the initial moments—the 1970s—and the early actions and protests that sparked the fight for wages for domestic work. This exploration seeks to identify the political, economic, and social reasons why women's

essential contributions remain unacknowledged despite their profound impact on society beyond the household.

2. CAPITALISM AND DEVALUATION OF DOMESTIC LABOR

The premise is that often the difficulties and concerns expressed by feminists when discussing wages for domestic work arise because wages are reduced to a mere sum of money, rather than being viewed as a political perspective: the critique is directed precisely at capitalist society. However, at least since the industrial era, capitalist society has separated social reproduction work from economic production. Associating the former with women and the latter with men, it has compensated reproductive activities with the “currency of love and virtue”, while remunerating productive work with money. In doing so, capitalism institutionalized new and modern forms of female subordination.

By separating reproductive labor from the broader universe of human activities, in which women’s work previously held a recognized place, capitalism relegated it to an institutionalized domestic sphere, where its social importance was obscured. In this new world, where money became a fundamental medium of power, the status of this work is defined by its unpaid nature: those who perform it are structurally subordinate to those earning money wages, despite their activity being a necessary precondition for waged labor, cloaked and mystified by new domestic ideals of femininity:

Una delle scoperte principali che abbiamo fatto quando abbiamo cominciato a guardarci intorno da donne, è stata proprio la casa, la struttura familiare come luogo di sfruttamento specifico della nostra forza-lavoro. Dovevamo per forza privilegiare nella nostra analisi questa sfera ‘privata’, queste mura domestiche al di fuori delle quali si ferma l’analisi marxista delle classi, nonché la pratica di organizzazione politica della sinistra parlamentare e non. Dentro la casa abbiamo scoperto il lavoro invisibile, questa enorme quantità di lavoro che ogni giorno le donne sono costrette ad erogare per produrre e riprodurre la forza-lavoro, base invisibile – perché non pagata – su cui poggia l’intera piramide dell’accumulazione capitalistica[1].

3. THE CAMPAIGN FOR WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK: CHALLENGES AND CRITIQUES

Paradoxically, while obscuring the importance and value of women, capitalist society renders its official economies dependent on the very same social reproduction processes whose value it denies. While it is important to analyze the implications of the distribution of domestic labor among women from different classes and national origins, in this paper we will always remember the broader framework of domestic labor, focusing particularly on developments in the 1970s: it is a type of work that all women, and some groups more than others, could or should naturally perform, as if they were inherently suited for it. This work is devalued, rendered invisible, and therefore unpaid or poorly paid. For instance, studies show that although, in some contexts or phases of their life cycle, employment as domestic workers can provide women with social mobility and the opportunity to escape from more impoverished, often rural, settings to urban environments, the tendency is to marginalize the women performing this work, which is stigmatized and underpaid. In fact, “il lavoro domestico è un lavoro femminile e in quanto tale svalorizzato” [2].

Beatrice Busi, drawing on some of Silvia Federici’s statements, emphasizes that the analysis and deconstruction of domestic labor as naturally feminine activity emerged precisely during that

period (late 1960s-1970s) when some groups of women refused to perform this work. Their objectives did not concern transforming the social processes assigning domestic activities to women: their struggles are summarized in the international slogan of the Domestic Workers' Movement, "domestic work is work", aiming to have domestic labor recognized as equal to other jobs. The issues they engage with and mobilize around include the recognition of the dignity of domestic work as a profession, the recognition of the same labor and social security rights, and the fight against all forms of socioeconomic marginalization.

According to Silvia Federici [3], for many women who have no choice outside of marriage and domestic work, wages could indeed bring about a significant change; but for those who believe they have other possibilities, such as a professional career, a broad-minded husband, communal living, a homosexual relationship, or a combination of these possibilities, it would make no difference. There are other ways to achieve independence, and the last thing feminists want is to achieve it as housewives — a destiny they consider "worse than death" [2]:

C'è chi comincia a dodici anni (o anche prima) e chi si illude un po' più a lungo – magari fino alla fine degli studi – di sfuggire a questo destino. C'è chi crede di riuscire a rifiutare il suo ruolo a livello individuale e chi, invece, accetta subito fino in fondo, cercando di non fare errori troppo grossi nella scelta del 'padrone': la scelta sbagliata si sconta con una vita[3].

The capitalist system has enacted one of the greatest forms of manipulation and mystified violence against any section of the working class, but at least it grants wages as fair compensation. Actually, wages, rather than paying workers for their labor, obscure all the unpaid work that translates into the employer's profit, although it does at least acknowledge the fact of being a worker, which allows for bargaining and struggle around the conditions and amount of those wages and that work. Because earning a wage means being part of a social relationship.

4. DOMESTIC LABOR AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION CRISES

In the case of domestic work, the situation is qualitatively different. The difference lies in the fact that it is not only imposed on women but has been transformed into a natural attribute of their bodies and personalities, into an inner necessity, an aspiration, supposedly derived from their deeply feminine nature. From the beginning of capitalist designs on women, this work was destined to be unpaid. Capitalism convinces women that it is a natural, inevitable, and even gratifying activity to ensure its acceptance: in other words, women have been prevented from fighting against it except in familial terms, which society collectively agrees to ridicule, further demeaning the protagonist of the struggle:

In realtà, quanto sia 'naturale' essere casalinga, è dimostrato dal fatto che ci vogliono minimo venti anni di parziale socializzazione, un tirocinio giornaliero diretto da una madre senza salario, per preparare una donna a questo ruolo, per convincerla che figli e marito sono il meglio che si possa avere dalla vita [3].

In the 1970s, many women believed they were marrying for love; others acknowledged marrying for money and security. In any case, they could not escape the relations of production determined by their status as women in capitalist society: they were raised to ensure that, as soon as the absence of other women made it necessary, they could sustain the production of labor power at any cost and without conflict.

Feminists denounce that while the money and love women receive is minimal, the work expected of them is immense. From the earliest days of life, women are taught to be docile, helpful,

submissive, and, most importantly, ready to sacrifice themselves, even deriving pleasure from it. By denying wages for domestic work and transforming it into an act of love, capital has first and foremost obtained an enormous amount of unpaid labor and ensured that women, far from fighting against it, aspire to this work as the best opportunity in life. At the same time, it has also controlled the male worker, making his woman dependent on his job and wages, as well as his servant:

Infatti, il nostro ruolo di donne è di essere serve non pagate ma felici e, innanzitutto, innamorate, della classe operaia, cioè di quegli strati del proletariato al quale il capitale è stato costretto a concedere maggiore potere sociale. Nello stesso modo in cui Dio ha creato Eva per far piacere a Adamo, così il capitale ha creato la casalinga per servire il lavoratore fisicamente, emotivamente e sessualmente [3].

Federici [3] emphasizes that many men begin thinking about marriage immediately after getting their first job, not just because they can afford it, but because having someone at home to care for them is the only condition that keeps them from going mad after a day spent on the assembly line or at the office. Capital adopts two policies, one for the bourgeois family and another for the proletarian family: the more exploited the man is at work, the more his wife must be trained to absorb his tensions, allowing him to restore his balance at the woman's expense. In other words, the more oppressed the man, the more he oppresses.

This deceit, labeled as “marriage” and “love”, affects all women, even those who are unmarried, because once domestic labor is fully transformed into a natural and sexual matter, once it becomes a female attribute, the entire female universe is characterized by it. A woman may not serve a particular man, but she is in a subordinate relationship with the entire male world. In this sense, “being called a woman is offensive and degrading” [3].

For feminists in the 1970s, demanding wages for domestic work meant rejecting this labor as an expression of their nature and, thus, directly rejecting the female role that capital had invented for women. Asking for wages for these activities inherently challenges the societal expectations of the female gender, expectations that are all instrumental to maintaining their status as unpaid domestic laborers.

During those years, it was common to compare women's struggle for wages to male workers' struggles in factories. In reality, women were not fighting to enter capitalist relations of production, as they were never truly excluded from them. The goal was to dismantle capital's plans for women at a critical moment in the planned division of labor and social power within the working class—a division through which capital maintained its dominance. Women were always encouraged by workers' movement parties to postpone their “liberation” to a hypothetical future because addressing the issue of domestic labor would mean challenging the foundation of the entire union, which relied solely on the factory, measurable working hours, and wages.

Wages for domestic work, therefore, is a revolutionary demand, not because it destroys capital in itself, but because it confronts capital and forces it to restructure social relations in ways more favorable to women and, consequently, to the unity of the working class. This does not mean that, once paid, women will continue to do it; rather, the opposite. Saying that women want money for domestic work is the first step in refusing to do it, because the demand for wages makes the labor visible, which is a necessary condition to begin fighting against it, both in its immediate aspect as domestic work and in its more insidious characteristic of femininity:

Ricordiamo che denaro vuol dire capitale, cioè potere di comandare il lavoro.
Quindi, riappropriarci di quei soldi che sono il frutto del nostro lavoro - del lavoro

delle nostre madri e delle nostre nonne – significa al tempo stesso mettere in discussione il potere del capitale di imporci un lavoro forzato[3].

Demanding wages for domestic work makes it clear that women's femininity — their minds, bodies, and emotions — have all been distorted for a specific function and thus instrumentalized against them as a model they must conform to in order to be accepted as women in society. Saying they want a wage makes it clear that domestic work is already money for capital, that it continues to profit from the hours spent in the kitchen or, worse, in the bedroom.

Capital has centralized all fundamental social production in factories and offices while extracting men from families, turning them into wage workers and placing on their shoulders the financial responsibility for women, children, the elderly, and the sick. The foundation of capitalist society is, in fact, the wage worker, whose wage indirectly organizes the exploitation of the unwaged: “il salariocomandaattorno a sépiùprestazioni di quantoappaianellacontrattazione di fabbrica. Quindi, il lavoro delle donne appariva una prestazione di servizi personali al di fuori del capitale”[4].

Women were isolated in the home, forced to perform work deemed unskilled: giving birth to, raising, disciplining, and serving the labor force for production. Their role remains invisible because only the product of their labor — the worker — is visible. If one is not paid, no one, within certain limits, monitors how long it takes to complete one's work. Domestic labor is different not only quantitatively but also qualitatively, as its qualitative difference lies in the type of commodity — labor power — that this employment is destined to produce.

While technological innovation can reduce the threshold of necessary labor and workers' struggles in factories can use technological advances to gain free time, this cannot correspondingly be true for domestic labor: “Greater mechanization of domestic tasks does not free up hours for women to the same extent, as they must procreate, raise, and remain responsible for children”, states Dalla Costa [4].

Never before capitalism has sexuality, both male and female, been subjected to regimes, norms, and constraints. Capitalist society constructs the family as a nucleus where the woman is subordinated to the man, as she does not participate in social production and cannot present herself independently on the same labor market. Consequently, just as it curtails all possibilities of invention and development in the labor field, it also stifles every opportunity for sexual, psychological, and emotional autonomy. In other words, “si assiste ad una menomazione dell'integrità fisica della donna dal cervello all'utero”[4].

Feminists protest that, in addition to being denied the possibility of entering factory production chains and receiving fair compensation for the “invisible labor” they perform within domestic walls, women are denied a sexual life, which is distorted into a reproductive function for the species or, more precisely, the force that produces labor power. A power relationship like that between men and women in the 1970s precludes all possibilities of sexual affection and intimacy. Mariarosa Dalla Costa argues that this is why “homosexuality represents the largest mass attempt to uncouple sexuality from power”[4].

Examining more closely the role of women as a source of social productivity, it is often asserted within the definition of wage labor that women, through domestic work, are not productive. This is true only if one ignores the enormous number of social services that capitalist organization transforms into private activities assigned to women in the home.

Capitalism prefers to import male labor power from underdeveloped areas and leave women at home, although this clashes with the tendency to bring women into industry—but only and

exclusively in specific and very limited sectors. This happens because it is convenient to keep women at home, without wages or the right to strike, as they must be ready to accommodate members expelled by periodic employment crises. The woman in the home serves to pacify, for free, potential social unrest.

Beatrice Busi[2], commenting a few decades later Mariarosa Dalla Costa's work, states that in other parts of her analysis, Dalla Costa equated reproductive labor with productive labor in the strict sense proposed by Marx. But how could this transition be realized?

Dalla Costa's fundamental idea was that the reproductive work performed at home by women was not only an addition to the necessary labor of reproduction carried out in factories by workers but also contributed to surplus value¹. This new perspective had the great merit of reintegrating, at least in the minds of feminists, domestic work—expelled from the economic sphere during the 19th century and treated ever since as a moral category—into the realm of economic values, making its schedules and burdens visible for the first time and drawing attention to the value of goods and services produced within the home. These material activities were observed realistically, in their exhausting entanglement with the delicate task of psychologically managing the stress of family members engaged in work, studies, union activities, and politics.

A few decades later, Mariarosa Dalla Costa herself would confirm her theories proposed in the 1970s. With the spread of childcare centers, society sought to give women the illusion that they could have more free time and fewer tasks to perform. It was a move to try to placate the increasingly insistent protests against domestic labor. However, “in quegli anni, non c'era minimamente idea del complesso di incombenze materiali e immateriali, prevedibili e imprevedibili, che costituiscono il quotidiano corredo di questo lavoro”[5].

Feminists demanded that domestic work, which absorbs an entire day of a woman's physical and mental capacity, be shared more equitably with men so that women could have more time and energy to pursue their demands. The fair division of domestic labor was never proposed as the ultimate goal of the struggle but rather as a premise for fighting to achieve better living and working conditions for themselves and others. Women's struggles around reproductive labor, in fact, have always been a driver of greater well-being and autonomy for those dependent on them—children and the elderly above all.

The demand for wages for domestic labor was essentially a call for emancipation and recognition of women's economic autonomy by the state, which sought to sidestep the economic claims of the women's movement through family law reform, centered on spousal equality. This caused several problems: real wages decreased, informal work became more widespread, and later, there was a decline in marriages and births, accompanied by a rise in divorces and separations.

Women refused to procreate and perform domestic work, triggering a crisis in social reproduction: the number of children declined, and other women were employed to carry out household tasks. The underlying idea was to make life choices different from their mothers and achieve economic independence solely through work outside the home, even if hiring domestic workers consumed much of the wages earned from such work.

¹Surplus value originates from the worker: the worker, in fact, sells their labor power to the capitalist as if it were a commodity. However, through their labor, the worker creates a value greater than what they are paid in wages; thus, surplus value is the labor the worker provides to the capitalist for free.

5. RETHINKING DOMESTIC LABOR IN THE CONTEXT OF PATRIARCHY AND CAPITALISM

Through these struggles initiated in the 1970s, women's autonomy made significant strides, both economically and "sexually". Many fundamental laws were passed, such as those on voluntary pregnancy termination, divorce, and family rights. At the same time, these achievements often came with significant sacrifices, such as motherhood.

Unexpectedly, however, Silvia Federici later distanced herself from her original thinking, unlike her colleague, particularly regarding Marxist theories[6]. Even in the 1970s, criticism focused primarily on Marx's failure to consider the entire area of reproduction and, therefore, much of women's labor. Moreover, while Marx laid the foundation for the fight against capitalism, he also emphasized its historical necessity. This may explain why Marx undervalued reproduction: it is not an activity reducible to mechanization.

The reevaluation of Marxist theories stems from their insensitivity to female exploitation and the overestimation of the progressive character of capitalism. Capitalist society tends to impose the burden of its own reproduction on those who work:

C'è un problema più profondo, che è legato certamente anche a un periodo storico, quello del processo rivoluzionario, e che però oggi ha una portata molto grossa. Questa sopravvalutazione della capacità del capitalismo di creare le basi materiali per la futura società comunista [...] ha poi portato Marx a sviste molto grosse, per esempio nei confronti dei rapporti patriarcali nella società capitalistica. È rimasto legato all'idea che il capitalismo e lo sviluppo dell'industria avrebbero necessariamente prodotto relazioni più egualitarie tra gli uomini e le donne, assorbendo le donne nel processo industriale, diminuendo la fatica fisica, e quindi avrebbero creato le condizioni per un modello familiare migliore, più alto. In realtà, mentre Marx scriveva il capitalismo stava creando nuove forme di rapporto patriarcale, ovvero una nuova famiglia operaia con la donna impiegata a tempo pieno come casalinga, perché anche se svolge un altro lavoro le sue mansioni principali sono quelle della riproduzione [6].

In other words, Marxism considers reproduction as secondary and focuses on production. It fails to account for how capitalist society has deeply impacted women's lives—socially, emotionally, economically, and sexually—and ends up creating new forms of patriarchy, where women always occupy a position of inferiority to men, despite their labor being twice as burdensome.

6. CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, the fundamental message these feminists sought to convey is very clear: wages for domestic work are only the beginning. Nothing could be more effective than demonstrating that women's virtues have a calculable monetary value, previously exploited by capital but now used against capital in favor of women and their power:

D'ora in poi ci dovranno pagare perché come donne non garantiamo più niente. Vogliamo chiamare lavoro quello che è lavoro, in modo tale da poter scoprire quello che è amore e creare quella che sarà la nostra sessualità che non abbiamo mai avuto modo di conoscere. E dal punto di vista del lavoro, possiamo chiedere non uno ma più salari, perché noi siamo state costrette a fare molti lavori nello stesso tempo[3].

Only when men see women's work as labor, lovemaking as labor, and acknowledge the possibility of women refusing both, will they change their attitudes. In this sense, wages for domestic work serve more as proof that women are capable of working as much as men and performing the same jobs. Women do not aspire to "reach positions of responsibility" because they have discovered that an office apron is not so different from a kitchen apron—indeed, it would be worse because they would have to wear both and fight against both. This struggle seeks to gain respect and recognition for what women have always done, forced by capital, and their ability to refuse it.

Federici [3] is highly critical of women who believe they can avoid domestic work because, wherever they go, others can always expect more work from them and can always count on their fear of making demands. The housewife's struggle, then, as Dalla Costa [5] highlights, is to completely rediscover the possibilities available to her, to find new ways to avoid double enslavement and further possibilities of capitalist control.

This theme remains highly relevant today: despite technological advancements, greater participation in the labor market, and increased independence, women are still considered inferior to men, and more is always expected of them without recognizing their merits or importance. Freud once said that "every woman, from birth, suffers frustration for not having a penis". Perhaps it would be better to say that this sense of frustration begins the moment a woman realizes that, in some way, "having a penis" means having power and control over her life and that of others.

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