

Housework: For Love or Money?

Les femmes qui travaillent à l'extérieur du foyer forment une armée de main-d'œuvre à bon marché. La valeur de leur temps est déterminée par rapport au travail ménager que la majorité des femmes font gratuitement. La lutte pour gagner un salaire aux ménagères sera une des épreuves les plus importantes dans la lutte pour la libération des femmes.

'Look up from that dishpan and smile, Canadian housewife. Today, the federal Advisory Council on the Status of Women announced that your work is worth at least \$26 billion a year to the economy, or \$6,000 for every household in the country.'

So began a recent article in the Toronto *Star* marking the publication of *Five Million Women*, the first comprehensive report on the value of housework in Canada. It is part of a mushrooming trend to assign a monetary value to women's work in the home, a trend that is worldwide and which recently saw the United Nations call on all governments to include housework in the Gross National Products of their countries. For women everywhere, these events mean more power to challenge the pervasive myth that *housework is an expression of the female nature*. From childhood we are all taught to nurture others and to cultivate personality traits—patience, subservience, and self-sacrifice—suited to such activity. We are socialized to serve the needs of others as the fulfillment of our feminine nature. What is commonly called sex-role stereotyping is, in reality, on-the-job training.

This cultural conditioning which makes housework appear as a 'private' activity outside the marketplace is, in fact, economically motivated. Its aim is to produce an army of unpaid workers on whose free labour the whole economic edifice rests. In Canada, the single largest occupational group is full-time housewives, who number five million and who produce the equivalent of twenty-seven per cent of the GNP.

As to what is produced in the homes of the nation, the answer is by now well known: goods and services that maintain the present labour force (our husbands) and create the future labour force (our children). A typical estimate of a housewife's services can be seen in the Prudential Life Insurance Company's study:¹

Job	Hrs per week	Value per hr	Total
Nursemaid	44.5	\$2.41	\$107.25
Cook	13.1	4.21	55.15
Housekeeper	17.5	2.41	42.13
Dishwasher	6.2	3.01	18.66
Laundress	5.9	3.01	17.76
Food Buyer	3.3	3.01	9.93
Dietician	1.2	7.22	8.66
Chauffeur	2.0	3.01	6.02
Gardener	2.3	2.41	5.54
Handywoman	1.7	3.01	5.12
Seamstress	1.3	3.61	4.69
Practical Nurse	.6	4.21	2.53
TOTAL HRS	99.6		Wk \$283.44

The fact that industry and government cannot function without this work was dramatically demonstrated by Iceland's General Strike of Women, in 1975. For twenty-four hours the entire country was paralyzed by a work stoppage led by the nation's housewives! In a society where women's

nature is equated with unpaid housework, *no woman can escape this identity entirely*. Whatever else we do, we are also expected to make the coffee, keep things tidy, and be supportive to those around us. Ask any secretary. To grasp how pervasive this association between women and housework really is, we need only look at the jobs we are offered in the paid labour force: nursing, teaching, service work, etc., in a word, collectivized housework.

Again, this association has an economic end. Women in the paid labour force in Canada earn *half* as much as what our male counterparts earn. We form an army of cheap labour whose time is valued *in relation to that of the majority of women who work for nothing in the home*. The fact that housework is valued at \$0.00 guarantees that women's work outside the home will be valued very low. The two are inescapably linked. In a society where work is synonymous with a paycheque (do you work or are you a housewife?), perpetuating a female identity synonymous with unpaid work in the home, and therefore low-paid work outside, is the height of injustice.

Has society the right to extract from women a double subsidy to the economy by robbing us of our right to equal recognition of our work and the dignity that goes with it?

The growing debate on the value of housework is one index of the power that women have built to challenge this fundamental economic injustice. Winning wages for housework will be *the* test for women's liberation if we are to free ourselves from poverty and second class status.



FOOTNOTE

¹ Information courtesy of Prudential Life Insurance Co. based on a family with a full-time homemaker, husband, and two children. Reprinted from *Family Circle* magazine, 26 July, 1977.