

**THE POWER of WOMEN  
and the SUBVERSION  
of the COMMUNITY**

**Mariarosa Dalla Costa  
and Selma James**

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Published by the Falling Wall Press and a group of individuals from the Women's Movement in England and Italy

Printed and bound by Butler and Tanner Ltd., Frome and London, England

First edition, October 1972

Second edition, February 1973

Third edition, September 1975

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This book has also been published in Italian, German, French and Spanish.

ISBN 0 9502702 4 5

Falling Wall Press Ltd.

79 Richmond Rd., Montpelier, Bristol BS6 5EP, England

## Foreword

When this book was first published three years ago, it was already clear that the international movement of women had upset basic assumptions on which this society rested. In confronting what happens in the family and on the street, we have had to confront what happens in the factory, the office, the hospital, the school—in every institution of capitalist society.

This book offered the women's movement a cohesive analysis, drawing on the descriptions by the movement of our diverse grievances. It offered a material foundation for 'sisterhood'. That material foundation was the social activity, the *work*, which the female personality was shaped to submit to. That work was housework.

In singling out the work of the housewife as that for which women are trained and by which women are defined; in identifying its product as labour power—the working class—this book broke with all those previous analyses of capitalist society which began and ended in the factory, which began and ended with men. Our isolation in the family while doing our work had hidden its social nature. The fact that it brought no wage had hidden that it was work. Serving men and children in wageless isolation had hidden that we were serving capital. Now we know that we are not only indispensable to capitalist production in those countries where we are 45% of their waged labour force. We are *always* their indispensable workforce, at home, cleaning, washing and ironing; making, disciplining and bringing up babies; servicing men physically, sexually and emotionally.

If our wageless work is the basis of our powerlessness in relation both to men and to capital, as this book, and our daily experience, confirm, then wages for that work, which alone will make it possible for us to reject that work, must be our lever of power. If our need for a wage and our need to break from our isolation

have driven us to a *second* job outside the home, to more work at low pay, then our alternative to isolation and wagelessness must be a *social struggle for the wage*.

This perspective and practice derives directly from the theoretical analysis of this book. But even when the authors understood that *Wages for Housework* was the perspective which flowed logically from their analysis, they could not know all its implication. (See footnotes 16 and 17 on pp.54-55 below.) The book has been the starting point not for 'a school of thought' but for an international network of organisations which are campaigning for *Wages for Housework*.

Some of those who have disagreed with the analysis, and with the perspective of *Wages for Housework* that flows from it, have said that the perspective may apply to Italy but not to Britain or North America. The fact that an Italian woman, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, signed the main article, was proof for them of its geographic limitations. In fact, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James wrote 'Women and the Subversion of the Community' together, as Mariarosa Dalla Costa herself has said publicly many times. The proof of the international implications of the analysis, however, lies not in the national origins of its authors, but in the international campaign for *Wages for Housework* which has now begun.

Power of Women Collective,  
Britain

July 1975

Comitato per il Salario  
al Lavoro Domestico  
di Padova  
(Padua Wages for  
Housework Committee)

#### PUBLISHERS' NOTE

We have left the text of Selma James's Introduction unchanged, even though, as the above Foreword makes clear, in referring to 'Women and the Subversion of the Community', Selma James is in fact referring to an article of which she is joint author.

## Introduction

The two articles which follow were written 19 years and 7,000 miles apart.

The first, "Women and the Subversion of the Community", is a product of the new women's movement in Italy. It is a major contribution to *the* question posed by the existence of a growing international movement of women: What is the relation of women to capital and what kind of struggle can we effectively wage to destroy it? We must hastily add that this is not the same as asking: What concessions can we wring from the enemy? - though this is related. To pose the first question is to assume we'll win; to pose the second is to calculate what we can salvage from the wreck of defeat. But in struggling to *win*, plenty can be gained along the way.

Up to now, the women's movement has had to define itself unaided by any serious heritage of Marxist critique of women's relation to the capitalist plan of development and underdevelopment. Quite the opposite. We inherited a distorted and reformist concept of capital itself as a series of *things* which we struggle to plan, control or manage, rather than as a *social relation* which we struggle to destroy.<sup>1</sup> Bypassing that heritage or lack of it, our movement explored the female experience, beginning with what we personally knew it to be. This is how we have been able for the first time on a mass scale to describe with profound insight and cutting precision the degradation of women and the shaping of our personality by forces which intended that we accept this degradation, accept to be quiet and powerless victims. On the basis of these discoveries, two distinct political tendencies have emerged, apparently opposite extremes of the political spectrum within the women's movement.

Among those who have insisted that *caste* and not class was fundamental, some women have asserted that what they call an "economic analysis" could not encompass, nor could a political struggle end, the physical and psychological oppression of women. They reject revolutionary political struggle. Capital is immoral, needs reforms and should be left behind, they say (thereby implying that the reforms are a moral obligation which are themselves a negotiated and above all non-violent transition to "socialism"), but it is not the only enemy. We must change men and/or ourselves first. So that not only political struggle is rejected; so is liberation for the mass of women who are too busy working and seeing after others to look for a personal solution.

The possible future directions of these politics vary, mainly because this point of view takes a number of forms depending on the stratum of women who hold it. An elite club of this type can remain introverted and isolated—harmless except as it discredits the movement generally. Or it can be a source of those managerial types in every field which the class in charge is looking for to perform for it ruling functions over rebellious women and, god bless equality, over rebellious men too.<sup>2</sup> Integral to this participation in the marginal aspects of ruling, by the way, is an ambition and rivalry up to now primarily identified with men.

But history, past and future, is not simple. We have to note that some of the most incisive discoveries of the movement and in fact its autonomy have come from women who began by basing themselves on a repudiation of class and class struggle. The task of the movement now is to develop a political strategy on the foundations of these discoveries and on the basis of this autonomy.

Most of those who have insisted from the beginning that *class* and not *caste* was fundamental have been less able to translate our psychological insights into autonomous and revolutionary political action. Beginning with a male definition of class, the liberation of women is reduced to equal pay and a "fairer" and more efficient welfare State.<sup>3</sup> For these women capital is the main enemy but because it is *backward*, not because it *exists*. They don't aim to destroy the capitalist social relation but only to organize it more rationally. (The extra-parliamentary left in Italy would call this a "socialist" as distinct from a revolutionary position.) What a ration-

ized capital—equal pay, more and better nurseries, more and better jobs, etc.—can't fix, they call "oppression" which, like Topsy, the orphaned slave child who never knew her parents, "just growed". Oppression disconnected from material relations is a problem of "consciousness"—in this case, psychology masquerading in political jargon. And so the "class analysis" has been used to limit the breadth of the movement's attack and even undermine the movement's autonomy.

The essentially similar liberal nature of these two tendencies, wanting to rationally manage "society" to eliminate "oppression", is not usually apparent until we see the "political" women and these "non-political" women join together on concrete demands or, more often, against revolutionary actions. Most of us in the movement belong to neither of these tendencies and have had a hard time charting a course between them. Both ask us: "Are you a feminist or are you political?"

The "political" women who talk of class are easy to identify. They are the women's liberationists whose first allegiance is not to the women's movement but to organizations of the male-dominated left. Once strategy and action originate from a source outside of women, women's struggle is measured by how it is presumed to affect men, otherwise known as "the workers", and women's consciousness by whether the forms of struggle they adopt are the forms men have traditionally used.

The "political" women see the rest of us as non-political and this has tended to drive us together in self-protection, obscuring or playing down real political differences among us. These now are beginning to make themselves felt. Groups which call themselves Psychology Groups (I'm not talking here about consciousness raising groups) tend to express the politics of caste most coherently.<sup>4</sup> But whichever quarter they come from, viewing women as a caste and only a caste is a distinct political line which is increasingly finding political and organizational expression in every discussion of what to do. In the coming period of intense working class activity, as we are forced to create our own political framework, casting away secondhand theories of male-dominated socialist movements, the pre-eminence of caste will be posed as the alternative and will have to be confronted and rejected as well. On this

basis alone can the new politics inherent in autonomy find its tongue and its muscle.

This process of development is not unique to the women's movement. The Black movement in the US (and elsewhere) also began by adopting what appeared to be only a caste position in opposition to the racism of white male-dominated groups. Intellectuals in Harlem and Malcolm X, that great revolutionary, were both nationalists, both appeared to place color above class when the white left were still chanting variations of "Black and white unite and fight", or "Negroes and Labour must join together". The Black working class was able through this nationalism to *redefine class*: overwhelmingly Black and Labor were synonymous (with no other group was Labor as synonymous—except perhaps with women), the demands of Blacks and the forms of struggle created by Blacks were the most comprehensive *working class* demands and the most advanced *working class* struggle. This struggle was able to attract to itself the best elements among the intellectuals who saw their own persecution as Blacks—as a caste—grounded in the exploitation of Black workers. Those intellectuals who got caught in the moment of nationalism after the class had moved beyond it saw race in increasingly individual terms and made up that pool from which the State Department could hook the fish of tokenism—appointing a Black as special presidential advisor on slum clearance, for example—and the personnel of a new, more integrated technocracy.

In the same way women for whom caste is the fundamental issue will make the transition to revolutionary feminism based on a redefinition of class or invite integration into the white male power structure.

But "Marxist women," as a woman from the movement in New Orleans says, "are just 'Marxist' men in drag." The struggle as they see it is not qualitatively different from the one the organized labor movement *under masculine management* has always commended to women, except that now, appended to the "general struggle", is something called "women's liberation" or "women's struggle" voiced by women themselves.

This "general struggle" I take to mean the class struggle. But

there is nothing in capitalism which is not capitalistic, that is, not part of the class struggle. The questions are (a) Are women except when they are wage workers auxiliary to capitalism (as has been assumed) and therefore auxiliary to a more basic, more general struggle against capitalism; and (b) Can anything ever have been "general" which has excluded so many women for so long?

Rejecting on the one hand class subordinated to feminism and on the other feminism subordinated to class, Mariarosa Dalla Costa has confronted what (to our shame) has passed for Marxism with the female experience that we have been exploring and struggling to articulate. The result has been a translation of our psychological insights into a critique of the political economy of the exploitation of women, the theoretical basis for a revolutionary and autonomous women's struggle. Based on what we know of *how* we are degraded, she moves into the question of *why*, in a depth as far as I know not reached before.

\* \* \* \*

One great achievement of Marx was to show that the specific social relations between people in the production of the necessities of life, relations which spring up without their conscious planning, "behind the backs of *individuals*" (*Menschen*—previously translated as *men*), distinguish one society from another. That is, in class society, the form of the relation between people through which the ruling class robs the exploited of their labor is unique in each historic epoch, and all other social relations in the society, beginning with the family and including every other institution, reflect that form.

For Marx history was a process of struggle of the exploited, who continually provoke over long periods and in sudden revolutionary leaps changes in the basic social relations of production and in all the institutions which are an expression of these relations. The family, then, was the basic biological unit differing in form from one society to another, directly related to the way people produce. According to him, the family, even before class society, had the subordinated woman as its pivot; class society itself was an extension of the relations between men on the one hand and women and children on the other, an extension, that is, of the man's com-

mand over the labor of his woman and his children.

The women's movement has gone into greater detail about the capitalist family. After describing how women are conditioned to be subordinated to men, it has described the family as that institution where the young are repressed from birth to accept the discipline of capitalist relations—which in Marxist terms begins with the discipline of capitalist work. Other women have identified the family as the center of consumption, and yet others have shown that housewives make up a hidden reserve work force: “unemployed” women *work* behind closed doors at home, to be called out again when capital needs them elsewhere.

The Dalla Costa article affirms all the above, but places them on another basis: the family under capitalism is a center of conditioning, of consumption and of reserve labor, but a center essentially of *social production*. When previously so-called Marxists said that the capitalist family did not produce for capitalism, was not part of social production,<sup>5</sup> it followed that they repudiated women's potential *social power*. Or rather, presuming that women in the home could not have social power, they could not see that women in the home produced. If your production is vital for capitalism, refusing to produce, refusing to *work*, is a fundamental lever of social power.

Marx's analysis of capitalist production was not a meditation on how the society “ticked”. It was a tool to find the way to overthrow it, to find the social forces who, exploited by capital, were subversive to it. Yet it was because he was looking for the forces that would inevitably overthrow capital that he could describe capital's social relations which are pregnant with working class subversion. It is because Mariarosa Dalla Costa was looking for *women's* lever of social power among those forces that she was able to uncover that even when women do not work out of their homes, they are vital producers.

The commodity they produce, unlike all other commodities, is unique to capitalism: the living human being—“the laborer himself”.

Capital's special way of robbing labor is by paying the worker

a wage that is enough to live on (more or less) and to reproduce other workers. But the worker must produce more in the way of commodities than what his wage is worth. The unpaid surplus labor is what the capitalist is in business to accumulate and what gives him increasing power over more and more workers: he pays for some labor to get the rest free so he can command more labor and get even more free, ad infinitum—until we stop him. He buys with wages the right to use the only “thing” the worker has to sell, his or her ability to work. The specific social relation which is capital, then, is the wage relation. And this wage relation can exist only when the ability to work becomes a saleable commodity. Marx calls this commodity *labor power*.

This is a strange commodity for it is not a thing. The ability to labor resides only in a human being whose life is consumed in the process of producing. First it must be nine months in the womb, must be fed, clothed and trained; then when it works its bed must be made, its floors swept, its lunchbox prepared, its sexuality not gratified but quietened, its dinner ready when it gets home, even if this is eight in the morning from the night shift. This is how labor power is produced and reproduced when it is daily consumed in the factory or the office. *To describe its basic production and reproduction is to describe women's work.*

The community therefore is not an area of freedom and leisure auxiliary to the factory, where by chance there happen to be women who are degraded as the personal servants of men. The community is the other half of capitalist organization, the other area of hidden capitalist exploitation, *the other, hidden, source of surplus labor*.<sup>6</sup> It becomes increasingly regimented like a factory, what Mariarosa calls a social factory, where the costs and nature of transport, housing, medical care, education, police, are all points of struggle.<sup>7</sup> And this social factory has as its pivot the woman in the home producing labor power as a commodity, *and her struggle not to.*

The demands of the women's movement, then, take on a new and more subversive significance. When we say, for example, that we want control of our own bodies, we are challenging the domination of capital which has transformed our reproductive organs as much as our arms and legs into instruments of accumulation of

surplus labor; transformed our relations with men, with our children and our very creation of them, into *work productive to this accumulation*.

\* \* \* \*

The second document, "A Woman's Place", originally published as a pamphlet, comes from the United States. It was written in 1952 at the height of the cold war, in Los Angeles, where the immigration of young working men and women had assumed Biblical dimensions. Though it bears my name, I was merely a vehicle for expressing what women, housewives and factory workers, felt and knew as immigrants to the Golden West from the South and East.

It was already clear even then that working outside the home did not make drudgery at home any more appealing, nor liberate us from the responsibility for housework when it was shared. It was equally clear that to think of spending our lives packing chocolates, or winding transformers, or wiring televisions was more than we could bear. We rejected both and fought against both. For example, in those days a man's friends would still laugh if they saw him wearing an apron and washing up. We changed that.

There is no doubt that the courage to fight for these changes sprang directly from that pay check which we so hated to work for. But though we hated the work, for most of us it provided the first opportunity for an independent social experience outside the isolation of the home, and *seemed the only alternative to that isolation*. After the mass entry of women into industry during the second world war, and our brutal expulsion between 1945 and 1947, from 1947 when they wanted us again we came back and, with the Korean war (1949), in increasing numbers. For all the reasons outlined in the pamphlet, we wanted money and saw no alternative to demanding jobs.

That we were immigrants from industrial, farming or coal-mining areas made us more dependent on that pay check, since we had only ourselves to fall back on. But it gave us an advantage too. In the new aircraft and electronics industries of L.A., in addition to the standard jobs for women, for example in food and clothing, we—more white women than Black, who were in those days largely

denied jobs with higher (subsistence) pay—we managed to achieve new freedom of action. We were unrestrained by fathers and mothers who stayed "back East" or "down South". Trade unions, formed in the East years before by bitter struggle, by the time they were imported West were negotiators for a 10-cents-a-year rise, and were part of the disciplinary apparatus which confronted us on the assembly line and which we paid for in high dues taken out before we ever saw our money. Other traditional forms of "political" organization were either non-existent or irrelevant and most of us ignored them. In short, we made a clean break with the past.

In the women's movement of the late sixties, the energy of those who refused the old forms of "protection", or who never knew them, finally found massive articulation. Yet 20 years before, in the baldness of our confrontation with capital (directly and via men) we were making our way through what has become increasingly an international experience. This experience taught us: the second job outside of the home is another boss superimposed on the first; a woman's first job is to reproduce other people's labor power, and her second is to reproduce *and sell* her own. So that her struggle in the family and in the factory, the joint organizers of her labor, of her husband's labor and of the future labor of her children, is one whole. The very unity in one person of the two divided aspects of capitalist production presupposes not only a new scope of struggle but an entirely new evaluation of the weight and cruciality of women in that struggle.

These are the themes of the Dalla Costa article. What was posed by the struggle of so-called "reactionary" or "backward" or at best "non-political" housewives and factory wives in the United States 20 years ago is taken by a woman in Italy and used as a starting point for a restatement of Marxist theory and a reorientation of struggle. This theoretical development parallels and expresses and is needed for an entirely new level of struggle which women internationally are in the process of waging.

We've come a long way, baby.

\* \* \* \*

It is no accident that the Dalla Costa article has come from Italy.

First of all, because so few women in Italy have jobs outside the home, the housewife's position seems frozen, and she derives little power from neighbors working out of the home. In this respect her situation is closer to the Los Angeles woman of "A Woman's Place" than to that same woman today. So that it is impossible to have a feminist movement in Italy which does not base itself on women in the home.

At the same time, the fact that today millions of women elsewhere go out to work and are engaged there in a struggle with new objectives throws her situation into stark relief and poses possibilities which the Los Angeles woman 20 years ago could not envisage: the housewife in Italy *or anywhere* can seek an alternative to the direct exploitation of the factory and office in order to get out of the home. By herself, in the Catholic Italian ghetto, she seems trapped unless she demands that jobs be created for her. As part of an international struggle, she can begin to refuse, as other women are refusing, to pass from capitalist underdevelopment through capitalist development in order to make a struggle for her liberation. Women with pay packets in the industrial as well as the Third World, by refusing to be wives to the house or wives to the factory, are posing a new alternative for themselves and for her.

Mariarosa says: "Capital itself is seizing upon the same impetus which created a movement—the rejection by millions of women of women's traditional place—to recompose the work force with increasing numbers of women. The movement can only develop in opposition to this . . . This ultimately is the dividing line between reformism and revolutionary politics within the women's movement."

Up to now a woman who needed to break her isolation and find autonomy could find these only in an alternative *within* capitalist planning. The struggle of women today is posing as the only alternative the struggle itself, and through it the *destruction* of the capitalist plan. In England the motive force of this struggle is the Unsupported Mother's fight for a guaranteed income; in the United States, the Welfare Mother's demand for a living wage and her refusal of the jobs organized by the State. The response

of the State in both countries shows how dangerous it considers this new basis of struggle to be, how dangerous it is for women to leave their homes, not for another job, but for a picket line, a meeting or to break the windows of the SS or Welfare Office.

Through an international movement "which is by its nature a struggle", the power from the female pay packet is put at the disposal of the wageless woman, so that the wageless woman can recognise and utilize her own power, hidden up to now.

The second reason that this orientation finds expression in Italy is that on another level the working class there has a unique history of struggle. It has behind it factory takeovers in the early '20s, the defeat by capitalism in its fascist version, and then an armed underground resistance against it. (I hope by now there is no need to add that this was a movement of men *and* women, though it is worth noting that we cannot imagine what the outcome would have been if women had played not only a *bigger* role but a *different* role in, for example, the factory takeovers.) In the postwar years were added to its ranks workers from Southern Italy who, emigrating from an area of underdevelopment, were new to and rebellious against the discipline of wage labor. By 1969, this working class by its struggle was able to orient to itself a massive student movement and create an extra-parliamentary left which, reflecting this history, is unique in Europe.

This extra-parliamentary left has not integrated women into its political perspective as an autonomous force, and is dominated by a male arrogance which Catholicism has promoted. But they concentrate on the class as they conceive of it, despite jargon they have broken from the dominant European leftist ideology which was eurocentric and intellectual, and above all, they advance and engage in *direct offensive action*.

One of the dominant premises of European ideology from which the Italian left has broken is that the working class in the United States—and not only the female of the species—is "backward". In the eyes of the European left, the Black movement was an exotic historical accident external to the class, and the standard of living of the most powerful layers of the class was



a gift of capital, not the fruit of bitter and violent struggle. What was not European, even when it was white, was not quite "civilised". This racism predates the slave trade, and has fed off the conquests of imperial states since 1492.

It is against this background that Mariarosa Dalla Costa chose "A Woman's Place" to be published in Italy along with her own essay, as an expression of the day-to-day revolutionary struggle 20 years ago of those who have been sneered at by European and American left intellectuals alike. Dalla Costa sees in the class struggle in the United States the most powerful expression of the class internationally; sees the class *as* international: it is clear that both the industrial and the Third worlds are integral to her view of the struggle.

Here then we have the beginnings of a new analysis of who is the working class. It has been assumed to be only the waged worker. Dalla Costa disagrees. The social relation of the waged to the unwaged—the *family*—is integral to the social relation which is capital itself—the wage relation. If these two are integral to the structure of capital, then *the struggle against one is interdependent with the struggle against the other.*

An analysis of class based on the structure of exploitation and the stage of the antagonism within this structure, can evaluate women's day-to-day struggle as it continues to develop by its causes and its effects, rather than by somebody else's idea of what our "political consciousness" should be.

In the UK and the US (and probably in other Western countries) the women's movement has had to repudiate the refusal of the white left to see any other area of struggle than the factory in the metropolis.

In Italy, the women's movement, while it works out its own autonomous mode of existence against the left and the student movement, is clashing<sup>9</sup> on a ground which, apparently, these latter had covered: how to organize the struggle at the community level. What they proposed for the struggle in the community, it turns out, was just an extension, a mechanical projection of the factory struggle: the male worker continued to be the central protagonist.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa considers the community as first and foremost the home, and considers therefore the woman as *the central figure of subversion in the community*. Seen in this way, women are the contradiction in all previous political frameworks, which had been based on the male worker in industry.<sup>10</sup> Once we see the community as a productive center and thus a center of subversion, *the whole perspective for generalized struggle and revolutionary organization is re-opened.*<sup>11</sup>

The kinds of action and organization which, with the heritage of working class struggle in Italy, can grow from a movement of class and caste, this time finally of women, in the heartland of the Catholic church, is bound to widen the possibilities of our own struggle in whatever country our international movement happens to be.

Power to the sisters and therefore to the class.

Selma James  
Padova, 27 July, 1972

## NOTES

1 "... Wakefield discovered that in the Colonies, property in money, means of subsistence, machines, and other means of production, does not as yet stamp a man as a capitalist if there be wanting the correlative—the wage worker, the other man who is compelled to sell himself of his own freewill. He discovered that *capital is not a thing, but a social relation between persons, established by the instrumentality of things.* Mr. Peel, he moans, took with him from England to Swan River, West Australia, means of subsistence and of production to the amount of £50,000. Mr. Peel had the foresight to bring with him, besides, 3,000 persons of the working class, men, women and children. Once arrived at his destination, 'Mr. Peel was left without a servant to make his bed or fetch him water from the river.' Unhappy Mr. Peel who provided for everything except the export of English modes of production to Swan River!" *Capital*, Vol. I, K. Marx, p.766, Moscow 1958. (Our emphasis.)

2 The *Financial Times* of March 9, 1971, suggests that many capitalists are missing the opportunity to "use" women in positions of middle manage-

ment; being "grateful outsiders", women would not only lower the pay structure, "at least in the first instance", but be a "source of renewed energy and vitality" with which to manage the rest of us.

3 If this seems an extreme statement, look at the demands we in England marched for in 1971: equal pay, free 24-hour child care, equal educational opportunity and free birth control and abortion on demand. Incorporated into a wider struggle, some of these are vital. As they stand, they accept that we not have the children we can't afford; they demand of the State facilities to keep the children we can afford for as long as 24 hours a day; and they demand that these children have equal chance to be conditioned and trained to sell themselves competitively with each other on the labor market for equal pay. By themselves these are not just co-optable demands. They are capitalist planning. Most of us in the movement never felt these demands expressed where we wanted the movement to go, but in the absence of an independent feminist political framework, we lost by default. The prime architects of these demands were women with a "class analysis".

4 Psychology itself by its nature is a prime weapon of manipulation, i.e. social control, of men, women and children. It does not acquire another nature when wielded by women in a movement for liberation. Quite the reverse. To the degree that we permit, it manipulates the movement and changes the nature of that to suit its needs. And not only psychology. "Women's Liberation needs

—to destroy sociology as the ideology of the social services which bases itself on the proposition that this society is 'the norm'; if you are a person in rebellion, you are a deviant.

—to destroy psychology and psychiatry which spend their time convincing us that our 'problems' are personal hang-ups and that we must adjust to a lunatic world. These so-called 'disciplines' and 'sciences' will increasingly incorporate our demands in order more efficiently to redirect our forces into safe channels under their stewardship. Unless we deal with them, they will deal with us.

—to discredit once and for all social workers, progressive educators, marriage guidance counsellors, and the whole army of experts whose function is to keep men, women and children functioning within the social framework, each by their own special brand of social frontal lobotomy." ("The American Family: Decay and Rebirth", Selma James, reprinted in *From Feminism to Liberation*, collected by Edith Hoshino Altback, Schenkman, Cambridge, Mass., 1971, pp.197-8.)

5 Marx himself does not seem to have said anywhere that it was. Why this is so requires more space than is available here and more reading of the man at the expense of his interpreters. Suffice it to say that, first, he is singular in seeing consumption as a phase of production: "It is the production and reproduction of that means of production so indispensable to the capitalist: the laborer himself." (*Capital*, Vol.I, Moscow, 1958, p.572.) Second, he alone has given us the tools to make our own analysis. And finally, he never was guilty of the nonsense with which Engels, despite his many contributions, has saddled us and which, from the Bolsheviks to Castro, has given a "Marxist"

authority to backward and often reactionary policies towards women of revolutionary governments.

6 I said earlier that Dalla Costa moves into the question of why women are degraded "in a depth as far as I know not reached before". Three previous attempts stand out (and can all be found in *From Feminism to Liberation*, previously cited.) "The Political Economy of Women's Liberation" by Margaret Benston attempts to answer the same question. It fails, in my view, because it bases itself not on Marx but on Ernest Mandel. Even the few paragraphs of Mandel which Benston quotes are enough to expose the theoretical basis of modern Trotskyist liberalism. What we must restrict ourselves to here is what he says about women's work in the home, which Benston accepts.

"The second group of products in capitalist society which are not commodities but remain simple use-value consists of all things produced in the home. Despite the fact that considerable human labor goes into this type of household production, it still remains a production of use-values and not of commodities. Every time a soup is made or a button sewn on a garment, it constitutes production, but it is not production for the market." (Quoted from *An Introduction to Marxist Economic Theory*, Merit, N.Y., 1967, pp. 10-11. Even the title betrays the falsity of the content: there is no such thing as "Marxist economic theory" or "Marxist political economy" or for that matter "Marxist sociology". Marx negated political economy in theory and the working class negates it in practice. For economics fragments the qualitative relations between people into a compartmentalized and quantified relation between things. When, as under capitalism, our labor power becomes a commodity, we become factors in production, objects, sexual and in every way, which the economists, the sociologists and the rest of the vampires of capitalist science then examine, plan for and try to control.)

Juliet Mitchell ("Women—The Longest Revolution") also believes that although women "are fundamental to the human condition, yet in their economic, social and political roles they are marginal." (P.93.) The error of her method, in my view, is that once again an interpreter of Marx, this time Althusser, is her guide. Here separation of economic, social and political roles is conscious policy.

Labor power is a commodity produced by women in the home. It is this commodity which turns *wealth* into *capital*. The buying and selling of this commodity turns the market into a *capitalist* market. Women are not marginal in the home, in the factory, in the hospital, in the office. We are fundamental to the reproduction of capital and fundamental to its destruction.

Peggy Morton of Toronto in a splendid article, "A Woman's Work Is Never Done", points out that the family is the "unit whose function is the maintenance of and reproduction of labor power, i.e. . . . the structure of the family is determined by the needs of the economic system, at any given time, for a certain kind of labor power . . ." (P.214.) Benston calls, after Engels, for the capitalist industrialization of household jobs, as "preconditions" for "true equality in job opportunity, and the industrialization of housework is unlikely unless women are leaving the home for jobs." (P.207.) That is, if we get jobs capital will industrialize the areas where, according to her, we only produce use-values and not capital, this wins us the right to be

exploited equally with men. With victories like that, we don't need defeats. On the other hand, Morton is not looking for what concessions we can wring from the enemy but how to destroy him. "All too often we forget why we are organizing women; the purpose of building a mass movement is not to build a mass movement, but to make revolution." Benston, she says, "does not provide any basis on which strategy for a women's movement can be based." The absence of this motive for analysis in the movement generally "encourages a real liberalism among us . . ." (P.212.) Right on.

7 For those who believe the struggle in the social factory is not political, let them note that here, more than in the factory, is the State directly the organizer of the life of the worker, especially if she is a woman, and so here the worker confronts the State more directly, without the intervention of individual capitalists and the mediation of trade unions.

8 Southern California had been invaded by a huge wave of immigration during the war. Between 1940-46, the population of San Diego had increased by 61%, that of L.A. by 29%. (*Business Week*, 20 Dec., 1947, p.72.)

9 It is literally clashing. As I write, the Italian women's movement is replying to the attacks by some men of the left which began with a physical confrontation in Rome this month, when a section of the feminist movement, Lotta Femminista, held an international seminar at the university on women's employment and naturally excluded men. The men said we were "racist" and "fascist" and broke up the seminar. We exchanged blow for blow and were not defeated. In fact our violent response to their violence drew us closer together.

10 Even when he is unemployed. At a recent Claimants Union conference members of one of the left groups were given the following instructions circulated in one of the group's internal documents.

"[Our] work in a C.U. should be to orientate the C.U. away from the unsupported mother, sick, old, etc., towards unemployed workers."

When some women in the Claimants Union discovered the document and reproduced it for the benefit of the conference, there was an uproar.

Such contempt for those sections of the class who are less powerful has terrifying implications.

If the male worker is the only subject of a political framework, then once women assert their central role in the struggle, that traditional political framework must be shattered.

11 Not only for Claimants Unions is this an urgent and practical question (see footnote 10). The armed branch of the Irish movement has been male enough in its relations with women and children to be satisfied with containing their participation in the struggle. If the fruit is bitter the women will be blamed.

## Women and the Subversion of the Community

These observations are an attempt to define and analyze the "Woman Question", and to locate this question in the entire "female role" as it has been created by the capitalist division of labor.

We place foremost in these pages the housewife as the central figure in this female role. We assume that all women are housewives and even those who work outside the home continue to be housewives. That is, on a world level, it is precisely what is particular to domestic work, not only measured as number of hours and nature of work, but as quality of life and quality of relationships which it generates, that determines a woman's place wherever she is and to whichever class she belongs. We concentrate here on the position of the working class woman, but this is not to imply that only working class women are exploited. Rather it is to confirm that the role of the working class housewife, which we believe has been indispensable to capitalist production, is *the* determinant for the position of all other women. Every analysis of women as a caste, then, must proceed from the analysis of the position of working class housewives.

In order to see the housewife as central, it was first of all necessary to analyze briefly how capitalism has created the modern family and the housewife's role in it, by destroying the types of family group or community which previously existed.

This process is by no means complete. While we are speaking of the Western world and Italy in particular, we wish to make clear that to the extent that the capitalist mode of production also brings the Third World under its command, the same process of destruction must and is taking place there. Nor should we take for granted that the family as we know it today in the most technically advanced Western countries is the final form the family can assume under capitalism. But the analysis of new tendencies can only be the product of an analysis of how capitalism created this family and what woman's role is today, each as a moment in a process.

We propose to complete these observations on the female role by analyzing as well the position of the woman who works outside the home, but this is for a later date. We wish merely to indicate here the link between two apparently separate experiences that of housewife and that of working woman.

The day-to-day struggles that women have developed since the second world war run directly against the organization of the factory and of the home. The "unreliability" of women in the home and out of it has grown rapidly since then, and runs directly against the factory as regimentation organized in time and space, and against the social factory as organization of the reproduction of labor power. This trend to more absenteeism, to less respect for timetables, to higher job mobility, is shared by young men and women workers. But where the man for crucial periods of his youth will be the sole support of a new family, women who on the whole are not restrained in this way and who must always consider the job at home, are bound to be even more disengaged from work discipline, forcing disruption of the productive flow and therefore higher costs to capital. (This is one excuse for the discriminatory wages which many times over make up for capital's loss.) It is this same trend of disengagement that groups of housewives express when they leave their children with their husbands at work.<sup>1</sup> This trend is and will increasingly be one of the decisive forms of the crisis in the systems of the factory and of the social factory.

\* \* \* \*

In recent years, especially in the advanced capitalist countries, there have developed a number of women's movements of

different orientations and range, from those which believe the fundamental conflict in society is between men and women to those focusing on the position of women as a specific manifestation of class exploitation.

If at first sight the position and attitudes of the former are perplexing, especially to women who have had previous experience of militant participation in political struggles, it is, we think, worth pointing out that women for whom sexual exploitation is the basic social contradiction provide an extremely important index of the degree of our own frustration, experienced by millions of women both inside and outside the movement. There are those who define their own lesbianism in these terms (we refer to views expressed by a section of the movement in the US in particular): "Our associations with women began when, because we were together, we could acknowledge that we could no longer tolerate relationships with men, that we could not prevent these from becoming power relationships in which we were inevitably subjected. Our attentions and energies were diverted, our power was diffused and its objectives delimited." From this rejection has developed a movement of gay women which asserts the possibilities of a relationship free of a sexual power struggle, free of the biological social unit, and asserts at the same time our need to open ourselves to a wider social and therefore sexual potential.

Now in order to understand the frustrations of women expressing themselves in ever-increasing forms, we must be clear what in the nature of the family under capitalism precipitates a crisis on this scale. The oppression of women, after all, did not begin with capitalism. What began with capitalism was the more intense exploitation of women *as* women and the possibility at last of their liberation.

## The origins of the capitalist family

In pre-capitalist patriarchal society *the home and the family* were central to agricultural and artisan production. With the

advent of capitalism the socialization of production was organized with *the factory* as its center. Those who worked in the new productive center, the factory, received a wage. Those who were excluded did not. Women, children and the aged lost the relative power that derived from the family's dependence on their labor, *which was seen to be social and necessary*. Capital, destroying the family and the community and production as one whole, on the one hand has concentrated basic social production in the factory and the office, and on the other has in essence detached the man from the family and turned him into a *wage laborer*. It has put on the man's shoulders the burden of financial responsibility for women, children, the old and the ill, in a word, all those who do not receive wages. From that moment began the expulsion from the home of all those who did not *procreate and service those who worked for wages*. The first to be excluded from the home, after men, were children; they sent children to school. The family ceased to be not only the productive, but also the educational center.<sup>2</sup>

To the extent that men had been the despotic heads of the patriarchal family, based on a strict division of labor, the experience of women, children and men was a contradictory experience which we inherit. But in pre-capitalist society the work of each member of the community of serfs was seen to be directed to a purpose: either to the prosperity of the feudal lord or to our survival. To this extent the whole community of serfs was compelled to be co-operative in a unity of unfreedom that involved to the same degree women, children and men, which capitalism had to break.<sup>3</sup> In this sense the *unfree individual*, the *democracy of unfreedom*,<sup>4</sup> entered into a crisis. The passage from serfdom to free labor power separated the male from the female proletarian and both of them from their children. The unfree patriarch was transformed into the "free" wage earner, and upon the contradictory experience of the sexes and the generations was built a more profound estrangement and therefore a more subversive relation.

We must stress that this separation of children from adults is essential to an understanding of the full significance of the separation of women from men, to grasp fully how the organization of the struggle on the part of the women's movement, even when it takes the form of a violent rejection of any possibility of

relations with men, can only aim to overcome the separation which is based on the "freedom" of wage labor.

### The class struggle in education

The analysis of the school which has emerged during recent years—particularly with the advent of the students' movement—has clearly identified the school as a center of ideological discipline and of the shaping of the labor force and its masters. What has perhaps never emerged, or at least not in its profundity, is precisely what precedes all this; and that is the usual desperation of children on their first day of nursery school, when they see themselves dumped into a class and their parents suddenly desert them. *But it is precisely at this point that the whole story of school begins.*<sup>5</sup>

Seen in this way, the elementary school children are not those appendages who, merely by the demands "free lunches, free fares, free books", learnt from the older ones, can in some way be united with the students of the higher schools.<sup>6</sup> In elementary school children, in those who are the sons and daughters of workers, there is always an awareness that school is in some way setting them against their parents *and their peers*, and consequently there is an instinctive resistance to studying and to being "educated". This is the resistance for which Black children are confined to educationally subnormal schools in Britain.<sup>7</sup> The European working class child, like the Black working class child, sees in the teacher somebody who is teaching him or her something against her mother and father, not as a defense of the child but as an attack on the class. Capitalism is the first productive system where the children of the exploited are disciplined and educated in institutions organized and controlled by the ruling class.<sup>8</sup>

The final proof that this alien indoctrination which begins in nursery school is based on the splitting of the family is that those working class children who arrive (those few who do arrive) at university are so brainwashed that they are unable any longer to talk to their community.

Working class children then are the first who instinctively rebel

against schools and the education provided in schools. But their parents carry them to schools and confine them to schools because they are concerned that their children should "have an education", that is, be equipped to escape the assembly line or the kitchen to which they, the parents, are confined. If a working class child shows particular aptitudes, the whole family immediately concentrates on this child, gives him the best conditions, often sacrificing the others, hoping and gambling that he will carry them all out of the working class. This in effect becomes the way capital moves through the aspirations of the parents to enlist their help in disciplining fresh labor power.

In Italy parents less and less succeed in sending their children to school. Children's resistance to school is always increasing even when this resistance is not yet organized.

At the same time that the resistance of children grows to being educated in schools, so does *their refusal to accept the definition* that capital has given of their *age*. Children want everything they see; they do not yet understand that in order to have things one must pay for them, and in order to pay for them one must have a wage, and therefore one must also be an adult. No wonder it is not easy to explain to children why they cannot have what television has told them they cannot live without.

But something is happening among the new generation of children and youth which is making it steadily more difficult to explain to them the arbitrary point at which they reach adulthood. Rather the younger generation is demonstrating their age to us: in the sixties six-year-olds have already come up against police dogs in the South of the United States. Today we find the same phenomenon in Southern Italy and Northern Ireland, where children have been as active in the revolt as adults. When children (and women) are recognized as integral to history, no doubt other examples will come to light of very young people's participation (and of women's) in revolutionary struggles. What is new is the autonomy of their participation *in spite of and because of* their exclusion from direct production. In the factories youth refuse the leadership of older workers, and in the revolts in the cities they are the diamond point. In the metropolis generations of the nuclear family have produced youth and student move-

ments that have initiated the process of shaking the framework of constituted power: in the Third World the unemployed youth are often in the streets before the working class organized in trade unions.

It is worth recording what *The Times* of London (1 June 1971) reported concerning a headteachers' meeting called because one of them was admonished for hitting a pupil: "Disruptive and irresponsible elements lurk around every corner with the seemingly planned intention of eroding all forces of authority." This "is a plot to destroy the values on which our civilization is built and of which our schools are some of the finest bastions."

## The exploitation of the wageless

We wanted to make these few comments on the attitude of revolt that is steadily spreading among children and youth, especially from the working class and particularly Black people, because we believe this to be intimately connected with the explosion of the women's movement and something which the women's movement itself must take into account. We are dealing here with the revolt of those who have been excluded, who have been separated by the system of production, and who express in action their need to destroy the forces that stand in the way of their social existence, but who this time are coming together as individuals.

Women and children have been excluded. The revolt of the one against exploitation through exclusion is an index of the revolt of the other.

To the extent to which capital has recruited the man and turned him into a wage laborer, it has created a fracture between him and all the other proletarians without a wage who, not participating directly in social production, were thus presumed incapable of being the subjects of social revolt.

Since Marx, it has been clear that capital rules and develops

through the wage, that is, that the foundation of capitalist society was the wage laborer and his or her direct exploitation. What has been neither clear nor assumed by the organizations of the working class movement is that precisely through the wage has the exploitation of the non-wage laborer been organized. This exploitation has been even more effective because the lack of a wage hid it. That is, the wage commanded a larger amount of labor than appeared in factory bargaining. *Where women are concerned, their labor appears to be a personal service outside of capital.* The woman seemed only to be suffering from male chauvinism, being pushed around because capitalism meant general "injustice" and "bad and unreasonable behavior"; the few (men) who noticed convinced us that this was "oppression" but not exploitation. But "oppression" hid another and more pervasive aspect of capitalist society. Capital excluded children from the home and sent them to school not only because they are in the way of others' more "productive" labor or only to indoctrinate them. The rule of capital through the wage compels every able-bodied person to function, under the law of division of labor, and to function in ways that are if not immediately, then ultimately profitable to the expansion and extension of the rule of capital. That, fundamentally, is the meaning of school. *Where children are concerned, their labor appears to be learning for their own benefit.*

Proletarian children have been forced to undergo the same education in the schools: this is capitalist levelling against the infinite possibilities of learning. Woman on the other hand has been isolated in the home, forced to carry out work that is considered unskilled, the work of giving birth to, raising, disciplining, and servicing the worker for production. Her role in the cycle of social production remained invisible because only the product of her labor, *the laborer*, was visible there. She herself was thereby trapped within pre-capitalist working conditions and never paid a wage.

And when we say "pre-capitalist working conditions" we do not refer only to women who have to use brooms to sweep. Even the best equipped American kitchens do not reflect the present level of technological development; at most they reflect the technology of the 19th century. If you are not paid by the hour,

within certain limits, nobody cares how long it takes you to do your work.

This is not only a *quantitative* but a *qualitative* difference from other work, and it stems precisely from the kind of commodity that this work is destined to produce. Within the capitalist system generally, the productivity of labor doesn't increase unless there is a confrontation between capital and class: technological innovations and co-operation are at the same time moments of attack for the working class and moments of capitalistic response. But if this is true for the production of commodities generally, this has not been true for the production of that special kind of commodity, labor power. If technological innovation can lower the limit of necessary work, and if the working class struggle in industry can use that innovation for gaining free hours, the same cannot be said of housework; to the extent that she must *in isolation* procreate, raise and be responsible for children, a high mechanization of domestic chores doesn't free any time for the woman. She is always on duty, for the machine doesn't exist that makes and minds children.<sup>9</sup> A higher productivity of domestic work through mechanization, then, can be related only to specific services, for example, cooking, washing, cleaning. Her workday is unending not because she has no machines, but because she is isolated.<sup>10</sup>

### Confirming the myth of female incapacity

With the advent of the capitalist mode of production, then, women were relegated to a condition of isolation, enclosed within the family cell, dependent in every aspect on men. The new autonomy of the free wage slave was denied her, and she remained in a pre-capitalist stage of personal dependence, but this time more brutalized because in contrast to the large-scale highly socialized production which now prevails. Woman's apparent incapacity to do certain things, to understand certain things, originated in her history, which is a history very similar in certain respects to that of "backward" children in special ESN classes. To the extent that women were cut off from direct socialized production and isolated in the home, all possibilities of social life outside the neighborhood were denied them,

and hence they were deprived of social knowledge and social education. When women are deprived of wide experience of organizing and planning collectively industrial and other mass struggles, they are denied a basic source of education, the experience of social revolt. And this experience is primarily the experience of learning your own capacities, that is, your power, and the capacities, the power, of your class. Thus the isolation from which women have suffered has confirmed to society and to themselves the myth of female incapacity.

It is this myth which has hidden, firstly, that to the degree that the working class has been able to organize mass struggles in the community, rent strikes, struggles against inflation generally, the basis has always been the unceasing informal organization of women there; secondly, that in struggles in the cycle of direct production women's support and organization, formal and informal, has been decisive. At critical moments this unceasing network of women surfaces and develops through the talents, energies and strength of the "incapable female". But the myth does not die. Where women could together with men claim the victory—to survive (during unemployment) or to survive and win (during strikes)—the spoils of the victor belonged to the class "in general". Women rarely if ever got anything specifically for themselves; rarely if ever did the struggle have as an objective in any way altering the power structure of the home and its relation to the factory. Strike or unemployment, a woman's work is never done.

#### The capitalist function of the uterus

Never as with the advent of capitalism has the destruction of woman as a person meant also the immediate diminution of her *physical integrity*. Feminine and masculine sexuality had already before capitalism undergone a series of regimes and forms of conditioning. But they had also undergone efficient methods of birth control, which have unaccountably disappeared. Capital established the family as the nuclear family and subordinated within it the woman to the man, as the person who, not directly participating in social production, does not present herself independently on the labor market. As it cuts off all her possibilities of creativity and of the development of her working

activity, so it cuts off the expression of her sexual, psychological and emotional autonomy.

We repeat: never had such a stunting of the physical integrity of woman taken place, affecting everything from the brain to the uterus. Participating with others in the production of a train, a car or an airplane is not the same thing as using in isolation the same broom in the same few square feet of kitchen for centuries.

This is not a call for equality of men and women in the construction of airplanes, but it is merely to assume that the difference between the two histories not only determines the differences in the actual forms of struggle but brings also finally to light what has been invisible for so long: the different forms women's struggles have assumed in the past. In the same way as women are robbed of the possibility of developing their creative capacity, they are robbed of their sexual life which has been transformed into a function for reproducing labor power: the same observations which we made on the technological level of domestic services apply to birth control (and, by the way, to the whole field of gynaecology), research into which until recently has been continually neglected, while women have been forced to have children and were forbidden the right to have abortions when, as was to be expected, the most primitive techniques of birth control failed.

From this complete diminution of woman, capital constructed the female role, and has made the man in the family the instrument of this reduction. The man as wage worker and head of the family was the specific instrument of this specific exploitation which is the exploitation of women.

#### The homosexuality of the division of labour

In this sense we can explain to what extent the degraded relationships between men and women are determined by the fracturing that society has imposed between man and woman, subordinating woman as object, the "complement" to man. And in this sense we can see the validity of the explosion of tendencies within the women's movement in which women want to conduct the struggle against men as such<sup>11</sup> and no longer wish to use their



strength to sustain even sexual relationships with them, since each of these relationships is always frustrating. A power relation precludes any possibility of affection and intimacy. Yet between men and women power as its right *commands* sexual affection and intimacy. In this sense, the gay movement is the most massive attempt to disengage sexuality and power.

But homosexuality generally is at the same time rooted in the framework of capitalist society itself: women at home and men in factories and offices, separated one from the other for the whole day; or a typical factory of 1,000 women with 10 foremen or a typing pool (of women, of course) which works for 50 professional men. All these situations are already a homosexual framework of living.

Capital, while it elevates heterosexuality to a religion, at the same time in practice makes it impossible for men and women to be in touch with each other, physically or emotionally—it undermines heterosexuality except as a sexual, economic and social discipline.

We believe that this is a reality from which we must begin. The explosion of the gay tendencies have been and are important for the movement precisely because they pose the urgency to claim for itself the specificity of women's struggle and above all to clarify in all their depths all facets and connections of the exploitation of women.

## Surplus value and the social factory

critique of Marx

At this point then we would like to begin to clear the ground of a certain point of view which orthodox Marxism, especially in the ideology and practice of so-called Marxist parties, has always taken for granted. And this is: when women remain outside social production, that is, outside the socially organized productive cycle, they are also outside social productivity. The role of women, in other words, has always been seen as that of a psychologically subordinated person who, except where she is

marginally employed outside the home, is outside production; essentially a supplier of a series of use values in the home. This basically was the viewpoint of Marx who, observing what happened to women working in the factories, concluded that it would have been better for them to be at home, where resided a morally higher form of life. But the true nature of the role of housewife never emerges clearly in Marx. Yet observers have noted that Lancashire women, cotton workers for over a century, are more sexually free and helped by men in domestic chores. On the other hand, in the Yorkshire coal mining districts where a low percentage of women worked outside the home, women are more dominated by the figure of the husband. Even those who have been able to define the exploitation of women in socialized production could not then go on to understand the exploited position of women in the home; men are too compromised in their relationship with women. For that reason only women can define themselves and move on the woman question.

We have to make clear that, within the wage, domestic work produces not merely use values, but is essential to the production of surplus value.<sup>12</sup> This is true of the entire female role as a personality which is subordinated at all levels, physical, psychological and occupational, which has had and continues to have a precise and vital place in the capitalist division of labor, *in the pursuit of productivity at the social level.* Let us examine more specifically the role of women as a source of social productivity, that is, of surplus value making. Firstly within the family.

### A. THE PRODUCTIVITY OF WAGE SLAVERY BASED ON UNWAGED SLAVERY

It is often asserted that, within the definition of wage labor, women in domestic labor are not productive. In fact precisely the opposite is true if one thinks of the enormous quantity of social services which capitalist organization transforms into privatized activity, putting them on the backs of housewives. Domestic labor is not essentially "feminine work"; a woman doesn't fulfill herself more or get less exhausted than a man from washing and cleaning. These are social services inasmuch as they serve the reproduction of labor power. And capital, precisely by instituting its family

structure, has "liberated" the man from these functions so that he is completely "free" for *direct* exploitation: so that he is free to "earn" enough for a woman to reproduce him as labor power. It has made men wage slaves, then, to the degree that it has succeeded in allocating these services to women in the family, and by the same process controlled the flow of women onto the labor market. In Italy women are still necessary in the home and capital still needs this form of the family. At the present level of development in Europe generally, in Italy in particular, capital still prefers to import its labor power—in the form of millions of men from underdeveloped areas—while at the same time consigning women to the home.<sup>14</sup>

And women are of service not only because they carry out domestic labor *without a wage and without going on strike*, but also because they always receive back into the home all those who are periodically expelled from their jobs by economic crisis. The family, this maternal cradle always ready to help and protect in time of need, has been in fact the best guarantee that the unemployed do not immediately become a horde of disruptive outsiders.

The organized parties of the working class movement have been careful not to raise the question of domestic work. Aside from the fact that they have always treated women as a lower form of life, even in factories, to raise this question would be to challenge the whole basis of the trade unions as organizations that deal (a) only with the factory; (b) only with a measured and "paid" work day; (c) only with that side of wages which is given to us and not with the side of wages which is taken back, that is, inflation. Women have always been forced by the working class parties to put off their liberation to some hypothetical future, making it dependent on the gains that men, limited in the scope of their struggles by these parties, win for "themselves".

In reality, every phase of working class struggle has fixed the subordination and exploitation of women at a higher level. The proposal of pensions for housewives<sup>15</sup> (and this makes us wonder why not a wage) serves only to show the complete willingness of these parties further to institutionalize women as housewives and men (and women) as wage slaves.

Now it is clear that not one of us believes that emancipation, liberation, can be achieved through work. Work is still work, whether inside or outside the home. The independence of the wage earner means only being a "free individual" for capital, no less for women than for men. Those who advocate that the liberation of the working class woman lies in her getting a job outside the home are part of the problem, not the solution. Slavery to an assembly line is not a liberation from slavery to a kitchen sink. To deny this is also to deny the slavery of the assembly line itself, proving again that if you don't know how women are exploited, you can never really know how men are. But this question is so crucial that we deal with it separately. What we wish to make clear here is that by the non-payment of a wage when we are producing in a world capitalistically organized, the figure of the boss is concealed behind that of the husband. He appears to be the sole recipient of domestic services, and this gives an ambiguous and slavelike character to housework. The husband and children, through their loving involvement, their loving blackmail, become the first foremen, the immediate controllers of this labor.

The husband tends to read the paper and wait for his dinner to be cooked and served, even when his wife goes out to work as he does and comes home with him. Clearly, the specific form of exploitation represented by domestic work demands a corresponding, specific form of struggle, namely the women's struggle, *within the family*.

If we fail to grasp completely that precisely this family is the very pillar of the capitalist organization of work, if we make the mistake of regarding it only as a superstructure, dependent for change only on the stages of the struggle in the factories, then we will be moving in a limping revolution that will always perpetuate and aggravate a *basic contradiction in the class struggle, and a contradiction which is functional to capitalist development*. We would, in other words, be perpetuating the error of considering ourselves as producers of use values only, of considering housewives external to the working class. As long as housewives are considered external to the class, the class struggle at every moment and any point is impeded, frustrated, and unable to find full scope for its action. To elaborate this further is not our task here. To

expose and condemn domestic work as a masked form of productive labor, however, raises a series of questions concerning both the aims and the forms of struggle of women.

#### Socializing the struggle of the isolated laborer

In fact, the demand that would follow, namely "pay us wages for housework", would run the risk of looking, in the light of the present relationship of forces in Italy, as though we wanted further to entrench the condition of institutionalized slavery which is produced with the condition of housework—therefore such a demand could scarcely operate in practice as a mobilizing goal.<sup>16</sup>

The question is, therefore, to develop forms of struggle which do not leave the housewife peacefully at home, at most ready to take part in occasional demonstrations through the streets, waiting for a wage that would never pay for anything; rather we must discover forms of struggle which immediately break the whole structure of domestic work, rejecting it absolutely, rejecting our role as housewives and the home as the ghetto of our existence, since the problem is not only to stop doing this work, but to smash the entire role of housewife. *The starting point is not how to do housework more efficiently, but how to find a place as protagonist in the struggle: that is, not a higher productivity of domestic labor but a higher subversiveness in the struggle.*

To immediately overthrow the relation between time-given-to-housework and time-not-given-to-housework: it is not necessary to spend time each day ironing sheets and curtains, cleaning the floor until it sparkles nor to dust every day. And yet many women still do that. Obviously it is not because they are stupid: once again we are reminded of the parallel we made earlier with the ESN school. In reality, it is only in this work that they can realize an identity precisely because, as we said before, capital has cut them off from the process of socially organized production.

But it does not automatically follow that to be cut off from socialized production is to be cut off from socialized struggle: struggle, however, demands time away from housework, and at the same time it offers an alternative identity to the woman who before found it only at the level of the domestic ghetto. In the

sociality of struggle women discover and exercise a power that effectively gives them a new identity. *The new identity is and can only be a new degree of social power.*

The possibility of social struggle arises out of the *socially productive character* of women's work in the home. It is not only or mainly the social services provided in the home that make women's role socially productive, even though in fact at this moment these services are identified with women's role. But capital can technologically improve the conditions of this work. What capital does not want to do for the time being, in Italy at least, is to destroy the position of the housewife as the pivot of the nuclear family. For this reason there is no point in our waiting for the automation of domestic work, because this will never happen: the maintenance of the nuclear family is incompatible with the automation of these services. To really automate them, capital would have to destroy the family as we know it; that is, it would be driven to *socialize* in order to *automate* fully.

But we know all too well what their socialization means: it is always at the very least the opposite of the Paris Commune!

The new leap that capitalist reorganization could make and that we can already smell in the U.S. and in the more advanced capitalist countries generally is to destroy the pre-capitalist isolation of production in the home by constructing a family which more nearly reflects capitalist equality and its domination through co-operative labor; to transcend "the incompleteness of capitalist development" in the home, with the pre-capitalist, unfree woman as its pivot, and make the family more nearly reflect in its form its capitalist productive function, the reproduction of labor power.

To return then to what we said above: women, housewives, identifying themselves with the home, tend to a compulsive perfection in their work. We all know the saying too well: you can always find work to do in a house.

They don't see beyond their own four walls. The housewife's situation as a pre-capitalist mode of labor and consequently this

"femininity" imposed upon her, makes her see the world, the others and the entire organization of work as a something which is obscure, essentially unknown and unknowable; not lived; perceived only as a shadow behind the shoulders of the husband who goes out each day and meets this something.

So when we say that women must overthrow the relation of domestic-work-time to non-domestic-time and must begin to move out of the home, we mean their point of departure must be precisely this willingness to destroy the role of housewife, in order to begin to come together with other women, not only as neighbors and friends but as workmates and anti-workmates; thus breaking the tradition of privatized female, with all its rivalry, and reconstructing a real solidarity among women: not solidarity for defense but solidarity for attack, for the organization of the struggle.

A common solidarity against a common form of labor. In the same way, women must stop meeting their husbands and children only as wife and mother, that is, at mealtime after they have come home from the outside world.

Every place of struggle outside the home, precisely because *every sphere of capitalist organization presupposes the home*, offers a chance for attack by women; factory meetings, neighborhood meetings, student assemblies, each of them are legitimate places for women's struggle, where women can encounter and confront men—women versus men, if you like, but as individuals, rather than mother-father, son-daughter, with all the possibilities this offers to explode outside of the house the contradictions, the frustrations, that capital has wanted to implode within the family.

#### A new compass for class struggle

If women demand in workers' assemblies that the night-shift be abolished because at night, besides sleeping, one wants to make love—and it's not the same as making love during the day if the women work during the day—that would be advancing their own independent interests as women against the social organization of work, refusing to be unsatisfied mothers for their husbands and children.

But in this new intervention and confrontation women are also expressing that their interests as women are not, as they have been told, separate and alien from the interests of the class. For too long political parties, especially of the left, and trade unions have determined and confined the areas of working class struggle. To make love and to refuse night work to make love, *is the interest of the class*. To explore why it is women and not men who raise the question is to shed new light on the whole history of the class.

To meet your sons and daughters at a student assembly is to discover them as individuals who speak among other individuals; it is to present yourself to them as an individual. Many women have had abortions and very many have given birth. We can't see why they should not express their point of view as women first, whether or not they are students, in an assembly of medical students. (We do not give the medical faculty as an example by accident. In the lecture hall and in the clinic, we can see once more the exploitation of the working class not only when third class patients exclusively are made the guinea pigs for research. Women especially are the prime objects of experimentation and also of the sexual contempt, sadism, and professional arrogance of doctors.)

To sum up: the most important thing becomes precisely this explosion of the women's movement as an expression of the specificity of female interests hitherto castrated from all its connections by the capitalist organization of the family. This has to be waged in every quarter of this society, each of which is founded precisely on the suppression of such interests, since the entire class exploitation has been built upon the specific mediation of women's exploitation.

And so as a women's movement we must pinpoint every single area in which this exploitation is located, that is, we must regain the whole specificity of the female interest in the course of waging the struggle.

Every opportunity is a good one: housewives of families threatened with eviction can object that their housework has more than covered the rent of the months they didn't pay. On the out-

skirts of Milan. many families have already taken up this form of struggle.

Electric appliances in the home are lovely things to have, but for the workers who make them, to make many is to spend time and to exhaust yourself. That every wage has to buy all of them is tough, and presumes that every wife must run all these appliances alone; and this only means that she is frozen in the home, but now on a more mechanized level. Lucky worker, luck wife!

The question is not to have communal canteens. We must remember that capital makes Fiat for the workers first, then their canteen.

For this reason to demand a communal canteen in the neighborhood without integrating this demand into a practice of struggle against the organization of labor, against labor time, risks giving the impetus for a new leap that, on the community level, would regiment none other than women in some alluring work so that we will then have the possibility at lunchtime of eating shit collectively in the canteen.

We want them to know that this is not the canteen we want, nor do we want play centers or nurseries of the same order! We want canteens too, and nurseries and washing machines and dishwashers, but we also want choices: to eat in privacy with few people when we want, to have time to be with children, to be with old people, with the sick, when and where we choose. To "have time" means to work less. To have time to be with children, the old and the sick does not mean running to pay a quick visit to the garages where you park children or old people or invalids. It means that we, the first to be excluded, are taking the initiative in this struggle so that all those other excluded people, the children, the old and the ill, can re-appropriate the social wealth; to be re-integrated with us and all of us with men, not as dependents but autonomously, as we women want for ourselves; since their exclusion, like ours, from the directly productive social process, from social existence, has been created by capitalist organization.

## The refusal of work

Hence we must refuse housework as women's work, as work imposed upon us, which we never invented, which has never been paid for, in which they have forced us to cope with absurd hours, 12 and 13 a day, in order to force us to stay at home.

We must get out of the house; we must reject the home, because we want to unite with other women, to struggle against all situations which presume that women will stay at home, to link ourselves to the struggles of all those who are in ghettos, whether that ghetto is a nursery, a school, a hospital, an old-age home, or a slum. To abandon the home is already a form of struggle, since the social services we perform there would then cease to be carried out in those conditions, and so all those who work out of the home would then demand that the burden carried by us until now be thrown squarely where it belongs—onto the shoulders of capital. This alteration in the terms of struggle will be all the more violent the more the refusal of domestic labor on the part of women will be violent, determined and on a mass scale.

The working class family is the more difficult point to break because it is the support of the worker, but as worker, and for that reason the support of capital. On this family depends the support of the class, the survival of the class—but *at the woman's expense against the class itself*. The woman is the slave of a wage slave, and her slavery ensures the slavery of her man. Like the trade union, the family protects the worker, but also ensures that he *and she* will never be anything but workers. And that is why the struggle of the woman of the working class against the family is crucial.

To meet other women who work inside and outside their homes allows us to possess other chances of struggle. To the extent that our struggle is a struggle against work, it is inscribed in the struggle which the working class wages against capitalist work. But to the extent that the exploitation of women through domestic work has had its own specific history, tied to the survival of the nuclear family, the specific course of this struggle which must pass through the destruction of the nuclear family as established by the capitalist social order, adds a new dimension

to the class struggle.

## B. THE PRODUCTIVITY OF PASSIVITY

However, the woman's role in the family is not only that of hidden supplier of social services who does not receive a wage. As we said at the beginning, to imprison women in purely complementary functions and subordinate them to men within the nuclear family has as its premise the stunting of their physical integrity. In Italy, with the successful help of the Catholic Church which has always defined her as an inferior being, a woman is compelled before marriage into sexual abstinence and after marriage into a repressed sexuality destined only to bear children obliging her to bear children. It has created a female image of "heroic mother and happy wife" whose sexual identity is pure sublimation, whose function is essentially that of receptacle for other people's emotional expression, who is the cushion of the familial antagonism. What has been defined, then, as female frigidity has to be redefined as an imposed passive receptivity in the sexual function as well.

Now this passivity of the woman in the family is itself "productive". Firstly it makes her the outlet for all the oppressions that men suffer in the world outside the home and at the same time the object on whom the man can exercise a hunger for power that the domination of the capitalist organization of work implants. In this sense, the woman becomes productive for capitalist organization; she acts as a safety valve for the social tensions caused by it. Secondly, the woman becomes productive inasmuch as the complete denial of her personal autonomy forces her to sublimate her frustration in a series of continuous needs that are always centered in the home, a kind of consumption which is the exact parallel of her compulsive perfectionism in her housework. Clearly, it is not our job to tell women what they should have in their homes. Nobody can define the needs of others. Our interest is to organize the struggle through which this sublimation will be unnecessary.

### Dead labor and the agony of sexuality

We use the word "sublimation" advisedly. The frustrations of

monotonous and trivial chores and of sexual passivity are only separable in words. Sexual creativity and creativity in labor are both areas where human needs demand we give free scope to our "interplaying natural and acquired activities".<sup>16</sup> For women (and therefore for men) natural and acquired powers are repressed simultaneously. The passive sexual receptivity of women creates the compulsively tidy housewife and can make a monotonous assembly line therapeutic. The trivia of most of housework and the discipline which is required to perform the same work over every day, every week, every year, double on holidays, destroys the possibilities of uninhibited sexuality. Our childhood is a preparation for martyrdom: we are taught to derive happiness from clean sex on whiter than white sheets; to sacrifice sexuality and other creative activity at one and the same time.

So far the women's movement, most notably by destroying the myth of the vaginal orgasm, has exposed the physical mechanism which allowed women's sexual potential to be strictly defined and limited by men. Now we can begin to reintegrate sexuality with other aspects of creativity, to see how sexuality will always be constrained unless the work we do does not mutilate us and our individual capacities, and unless the persons with whom we have sexual relations are not our masters and are not also mutilated by *their* work. To explode the vaginal myth is to demand female autonomy as opposed to subordination and sublimation. But it is not only the clitoris versus the vagina. It is both versus the uterus. Either the vagina is primarily the passage to the reproduction of labor power sold as a commodity, the capitalist function of the uterus, or it is part of our natural powers, our social equipment. Sexuality after all is the most social of expressions, the deepest human communication. It is in that sense the dissolution of autonomy. The working class organizes as a class to transcend itself as a class; within that class we organize autonomously to create the basis to transcend autonomy.

### The "political" attack against women

But while we are finding our way of being and of organizing ourselves in struggle, we discover we are confronted by those who are only too eager to attack women, even as we form a movement. In

defending herself against obliteration, through work and through consumption, they say, the woman is responsible for the lack of unity of the class. Let us make a partial list of the sins of which she stands accused. They say:

1. She wants more of her husband's wage to buy for example clothes for herself and her children, not based on what he thinks she needs but on what she thinks she and her children should have. He works hard for the money. She only demands another kind of distribution of their lack of wealth, rather than assisting his struggle for more wealth, more wages.

2. She is in rivalry with other women to be more attractive than they, to have more things than they do, and to have a cleaner and tidier house than her neighbors'. She doesn't ally with them as she should on a class basis.

3. She buries herself in her home and refuses to understand the struggle of her husband on the production line. She may even complain when he goes out on strike rather than backing him up. She votes Conservative.

These are some of the reasons given by those who consider her reactionary or at best backward, even by men who take leading roles in factory struggles and who seem most able to understand the nature of the social boss because of their militant action. It comes easy to them to condemn women for what they consider to be backwardness because that is the prevailing ideology of the society. They do not add that they have benefitted from women's subordinate position by being waited on hand and foot from the moment of their birth. Some do not even know that they have been waited on, so natural is it to them for mothers and sisters and daughters to serve "their" men. It is very difficult for us, on the other hand, to separate inbred male supremacy from men's attack, which appears to be strictly "political", launched only for the benefit of the class.

Let us look at the matter more closely.

### 1. Women as consumers

Women do not make the home the center of consumption. The process of consumption is integral to the production of labor

power, and if women refused to do the shopping (that is, to spend), this would be strike action. Having said that, however, we must add that those social relationships which women are denied because they are cut off from socially organized labor, they often try to compensate for by buying things. Whether it is adjudged trivial depends on the viewpoint and sex of the judge. Intellectuals buy books, but no one calls this consumption trivial. Independent of the validity of the contents, the book in this society still represents, through a tradition older than capitalism, a male value.

We have already said that women buy things for their home because that home is the only proof that they exist. But the idea that frugal consumption is in any way a liberation is as old as capitalism, and comes from the capitalists who always blame the worker's situation on the worker. For years Harlem was told by head-shaking liberals that if Black men would only stop driving Cadillacs (until the finance company took them back), the problem of color would be solved. Until the violence of the struggle—the only fitting reply—provided a measure of social power, that Cadillac was one of the few ways to display the potential for power. *This* and not "practical economics" caused the liberals pain.

In any case, nothing any of us buys would we need if we were free. Not the food they poison for us, nor the clothes that identify us by class, sex and generation, nor the houses in which they imprison us.

In any case, too, our problem is that we never have enough, not that we have too much. And that pressure which women place on men is *a defense of the wage, not an attack*. Precisely because women are the slaves of wage slaves, men divide the wage between themselves and the general family expense. If women did not make demands, the general family standard of living could drop to absorb the inflation—the woman of course is the first to do without. Thus unless the woman makes demands, the family is functional to capital in an additional sense to the ones we have listed: it can absorb the fall in the price of labor power.<sup>19</sup> This, therefore, is the most ongoing material way in which women can defend the living standards of the class. And when they go out to political meetings, they will need even more money!

## 2. Women as rivals

As for women's "rivalry", Frantz Fanon has clarified for the Third World what only racism prevents from being generally applied to the class. The colonized, he says, when they do not organize against their oppressors, attack each other. The woman's pressure for greater consumption may at times express itself in the form of rivalry, but nevertheless as we have said protects the living standards of the class. Which is unlike women's sexual rivalry; that rivalry is rooted in their economic and social dependence on men. To the degree that they live for men, dress for men, work for men, they are manipulated by men through this rivalry.<sup>20</sup>

As for rivalry about their homes, women are trained from birth to be obsessive and possessive about clean and tidy homes. But men cannot have it both ways; they cannot continue to enjoy the privilege of having a private servant and then complain about the effects of privatization. If they continue to complain, we must conclude that their attack on us for rivalry is really an apology for our servitude. If Fanon was not right, that the strife among the colonized is an expression of their low level of organization, then the antagonism is a sign of natural incapacity. When we call a home a ghetto, we could call it a colony governed by indirect rule and be as accurate. The resolution of the antagonism of the colonized to each other lies in autonomous struggle. Women have overcome greater obstacles than rivalry to unite in supporting men in struggles. Where women have been less successful is in transforming and deepening moments of struggle by making of them opportunities to raise their own demands. Autonomous struggle turns the question on its head: not "will women unite to support men", but "will men unite to support women".

## 3. Women as divisive

What has prevented previous political intervention by women? Why can they be used in certain circumstances against strikes? Why, in other words, is the class not united? From the beginning of this document we have made central the exclusion of women from socialized production. That is an objective character of

capitalist organization: co-operative labor in the factory and office, isolated labor in the home. This is mirrored subjectively by the way workers in industry organize separately from the community. What is the community to do? What are women to do? Support, be appendages to men in the home *and* in the struggle, even form a women's auxiliary to unions. This division and *this kind of division* is the history of the class. At every stage of the struggle the most peripheral to the productive cycle are used against those at the center, so long as the latter ignore the former. This is the history of trade unions, for example, in the United States, when Black workers were used as strikebreakers—never, by the way, as often as white workers were led to believe—Blacks like women are immediately identifiable and reports of strikebreaking reinforce prejudices which arise from objective divisions: the white on the assembly line, the Black sweeping round his feet; or the man on the assembly line, the woman sweeping round his feet when he gets home.

Men when they reject work consider themselves militant, and when we reject our work, these same men consider us nagging wives. When some of us vote Conservative because we have been excluded from political struggle, they think we are backward, while they have voted for parties which didn't even consider that we existed as anything but ballast, and in the process sold them (and us all) down the river.

## C. THE PRODUCTIVITY OF DISCIPLINE

The third aspect of women's role in the family is that, because of the special brand of stunting of the personality already discussed, the woman becomes a repressive figure, disciplinarian of all the members of the family, ideologically and psychologically. She may live under the tyranny of her husband, of her home, the tyranny of striving to be "heroic mother and happy wife" when her whole existence repudiates this ideal. Those who are tyrannized and lack power are with the new generation for the first years of their lives producing docile workers and little tyrants, in the same way the teacher does at school. (In this the woman is joined by her husband: not by chance do parent-teacher associations exist.) Women, responsible for the reproduction of labor power, on the one hand discipline the children who



will be workers tomorrow and on the other hand discipline the husband to work today, for only his wage can pay for labor power to be reproduced.

\* \* \* \*

Here we have only attempted to consider female domestic productivity without going into detail about the psychological implications. At least we have located and essentially outlined this female domestic productivity as it passes through the complexities of the role that the woman plays (in addition, that is, to the actual domestic work the burden of which she assumes without pay). We pose, then, as foremost the need to break this role that wants women divided from each other, from men and from children, each locked in her family as the chrysalis in the cocoon that imprisons itself by its own work, to die and leave silk for capital. To reject all this, as we have already said, means for housewives to recognize themselves also as a section of the class, the most degraded because they are not paid a wage.

The housewife's position in the overall struggle of women is crucial, since it undermines the very pillar supporting the capitalist organization of work, namely the family.

So every goal that tends to affirm the individuality of women against this figure complementary to everything and everybody, that is, the housewife, is worth posing as a goal subversive to the continuation, the productivity of this role.

In this same sense all the demands that can serve to restore to the woman the integrity of her basic physical functions, starting with the sexual one which was the first to be robbed along with productive creativity, have to be posed with the greatest urgency.

It is not by chance that research in birth control has developed so slowly, that abortion is forbidden almost the world over or conceded finally only for "therapeutic" reasons.

To move first on these demands is not facile reformism. Capitalist management of these matters poses over and over discrimination of class and discrimination of women specifically.

Why were proletarian women, Third World women, used as guinea pigs in this research? Why does the question of birth control continue to be posed as women's problem? To begin to struggle to overthrow the capitalist management over these matters is to move on a class basis, and on a specifically female basis. To link these struggles with the struggle against motherhood conceived as the responsibility of women exclusively, against domestic work conceived as women's work, ultimately against the models that capitalism offers us as examples of women's emancipation which are nothing more than ugly copies of the male role, is to struggle against the division and organization of labor.

## Women and the struggle not to work

Let us sum up. The role of housewife, behind whose isolation is hidden social labor, must be destroyed. But our alternatives are strictly defined. Up to now, the myth of female incapacity, rooted in this isolated woman dependent on someone else's wage and therefore shaped by someone else's consciousness, has been broken by only one action: the woman getting her own wage, breaking the back of personal economic dependence, making her own independent experience with the world outside the home, performing social labor in a socialized structure, whether the factory or the office, and initiating there her own forms of social rebellion along with the traditional forms of the class. *The advent of the women's movement is a rejection of this alternative.*

Capital itself is seizing upon the same impetus which created a movement—the rejection by millions of women of women's traditional place—to recompose the work force with increasing numbers of women. The movement can only develop in opposition to this. It poses by its very existence and must pose with increasing articulation in action that women refuse the myth of liberation through work.

For we have worked enough. We have chopped billions of tons of cotton, washed billions of dishes, scrubbed billions of floors,

typed billions of words, wired billions of radio sets, washed billions of nappies, by hand and in machines. Every time they have "let us in" to some traditionally male enclave, it was to find for us a new level of exploitation. Here again we must make a parallel, different as they are, between underdevelopment in the Third World and underdevelopment in the metropolis—to be more precise, in the kitchens of the metropolis. Capitalist planning proposes to the Third World that it "develop"; that in addition to its present agonies, it too suffer the agony of an industrial counter-revolution. Women in the metropolis have been offered the same "aid". But those of us who have gone out of our homes to work because we had to or for extras or for economic independence have warned the rest: inflation has riveted us to this bloody typing pool or to this assembly line, and in that there is no salvation. We must refuse the development they are offering us. But the struggle of the working woman is not to return to the isolation of the home, appealing as this sometimes may be on Monday morning; any more than the housewife's struggle is to exchange being imprisoned in a house for being clinched to desks or machines, appealing as this sometimes may be compared to the loneliness of the 12th story flat.

Women must completely discover their own possibilities—which are neither mending socks nor becoming captains of ocean-going ships. Better still, we *may* wish to do these things, but these now cannot be located anywhere but in the history of capital.

The challenge to the women's movement is to find modes of struggle which, while they liberate women from the home, at the same time avoid on the one hand a double slavery and on the other prevent another degree of capitalistic control and regimentation. *This ultimately is the dividing line between reformism and revolutionary politics within the women's movement.*

It seems that there have been few women of genius. There could not be since, cut off from the social process, we cannot see on what matters they could exercise their genius. Now there is a matter, the struggle itself.

Freud said also that every woman from birth suffers from penit

envy. He forgot to add that this feeling of envy begins from the moment when she perceives that in some way to have a penis means to have power. Even less did he realize that the traditional power of the penis commenced upon a whole new history at the very moment when the separation of man from woman became a capitalistic division.

And this is where our struggle begins.

Mariarosa Dalla Costa & Selma James  
29 December 1971

## NOTES

1 This happened as part of the massive demonstration of women celebrating International Women's Day in the US, August 1970.

2 This is to assume a whole new meaning for "education", and the work now being done on the history of compulsory education—forced learning—proves this. In England teachers were conceived of as "moral police" who could 1) condition children against "crime"—curb working class reappropriation in the community; 2) destroy "the mob", working class organization based on a family which was still either a productive unit or at least a viable organizational unit; 3) make habitual regular attendance and good timekeeping so necessary to children's later employment; and 4) stratify the class by grading and selection. As with the family itself, the transition to this new form of social control was not smooth and direct, and was the result of contradictory forces both within the class and within capital, as with every phase of the history of capitalism.

3 Wage labor is based on the subordination of all relationships to the wage relation. The worker must enter as an "individual" into a contract with capital stripped of the protection of kinships.

4 Karl Marx, "Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of the State", *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. and trans. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat, N.Y., 1967, p.176.

5 We are not dealing here with the narrowness of the nuclear family that prevents children from having an easy transition to forming relations with other people; nor with what follows from this, the argument of psychologists

that proper conditioning would have avoided such a crisis. We are dealing with the entire organization of the society, of which family, school and factory are each one ghettoized compartment. So every kind of passage from one to another of these compartments is a painful passage. The pain cannot be eliminated by tinkering with the relations between one ghetto and another but only by the destruction of every ghetto.

6 "Free fares, free lunches, free books" was one of the slogans of a section of the Italian students movement which aimed to connect the struggle of younger students with workers and university students.

7 In Britain and the US the psychologists Eysenck and Jensen, who are convinced "scientifically" that Blacks have a lower "intelligence" than whites, and the progressive educators like Ivan Illyich seem diametrically opposed. What they aim to achieve links them. They are divided by method. In any case the psychologists are not more racist than the rest, only more direct. "Intelligence" is the ability to assume your enemy's case as wisdom and to shape your own logic on the basis of this. Where the whole society operates institutionally on the assumption of white racial superiority, these psychologists propose more conscious and thorough "conditioning" so that children who do not learn to read do not learn instead to make molotov cocktails. A sensible view with which Illyich, who is concerned with the "underachievement" of children (that is, rejection by them of "intelligence"), can agree.

8 In spite of the fact that capital manages the schools, control is never given once and for all. The working class continually and increasingly challenges the contents and refuses the costs of capitalist schooling. The response of the capitalist system is to re-establish its own control, and this control tends to be more and more regimented on factory-like lines.

The new policies on education which are being hammered out even as we write, however, are more complex than this. We can only indicate here the impetus for these new policies:

(a) Working class youth reject that education prepares them for anything but a factory, even if they will wear white collars there and use typewriters and drawing boards instead of riveting machines.

(b) Middle class youth reject the role of mediator between the classes and the repressed personality this mediating role demands.

(c) A new labor power more wage and status differentiated is called for. The present egalitarian trend must be reversed.

(d) A new type of labor process may be created which will attempt to interest the worker in "participating" instead of refusing the monotony and fragmentation of the present assembly line.

If the traditional "road to success" and even "success" itself are rejected by the young, new goals will have to be found to which they can aspire, that is, for which they will go to school and go to work. New "experiments" in "free" education, where the children are encouraged to participate in planning their own education and there is greater democracy between teacher and taught are springing up daily. It is an illusion to believe that this is a defeat for capital any more than regimentation will be a victory. For in the

creation of a labor power more creatively manipulated, capital will not in the process lose 0.1% of profit. "As a matter of fact," they are in effect saying, "you can be far more efficient for us if you take your own road, so long as it is through our territory." In some parts of the factory and in the social factory, capital's slogan will increasingly be "Liberty and fraternity to guarantee and even extend equality."

9 We are not at all ignoring the attempts at this moment to make test-tube babies. But today such mechanisms belong completely to capitalist science and control. The use would be completely against us and against the class. It is not in our interest to abdicate procreation, to consign it to the hands of the enemy. It is in our interest to conquer the freedom to procreate for which we will pay neither the price of the wage nor the price of social exclusion.

10 To the extent that not technological innovation but only "human care" can raise children, the effective liberation from *domestic work time*, the *qualitative change of domestic work*, can derive only from a movement of women, from a struggle of women: the more the movement grows, the less men—and first of all political militants—can count on female baby-minding. And at the same time the new social ambience that the movement constructs offers to children social space, with both men and women, that has nothing to do with the day care centers organized by the State. These are already victories of struggle. Precisely because they are the *results* of a movement that is by its nature a struggle, they do not aim to *substitute* any kind of co-operation for the struggle itself.

11 It is impossible to say for how long these tendencies will continue to drive the movement forward and when they will turn into their opposite.

12 Some first readers in English have found that this definition of women's work should be more precise. What we meant precisely is that housework as work is *productive* in the Marxian sense, that is, is producing surplus value.

We speak immediately after about the productivity of the entire female role. To make clearer the productivity of the woman both as related to her work and as related to her entire role must wait for a later text on which we are now at work. In this the woman's place is explained in a more articulated way from the point of view of the entire capitalist circuit.

13 See Introduction p.11. Labor power "is a strange commodity for this is not a thing. The ability to labor resides only in a human being whose life is consumed in the process of producing...*To describe its basic production and reproduction is to describe women's work.*"

14 This, however, is being countered by an opposite tendency, to bring women into industry in certain particular sectors. Differing needs of capital within the same geographical sector have produced differing and even opposing propaganda and policies. Where in the past family stability has been based on a relatively standardized mythology (policy and propaganda being uniform and officially uncontested), today various sectors of capital contradict each other and

undermine the very definition of family as a stable, unchanging, "natural" unit. The classic example of this is the variety of views and financial policies on birth control. The British government has recently doubled its allocation of funds for this purpose. We must examine to what extent this policy is connected with a racist immigration policy, that is, manipulation of the sources of mature labor power; and with the increasing erosion of the work ethic which results in movements of the unemployed and unsupported mothers, that is, controlling births which pollute the purity of capital with revolutionary children.

15 Which is the policy, among others, of the Communist Party in Italy who for some years proposed a bill to the Italian parliament which would have given a pension to women at home, both housewives and single women, when they reached 55 years of age. The bill was never passed.

16 Today the demand of wages for housework is put forward increasingly and with less opposition in the women's movement in Italy and elsewhere. Since this document was first drafted (June '71), the debate has become more profound and many uncertainties that were due to the relative newness of the discussion have been dispelled. But above all, the weight of the needs of proletarian women has not only radicalized the demands of the movement. It has also given us greater strength and confidence to advance them. A year ago at the beginning of the movement in Italy, there were those who still thought that the State could easily suffocate the female rebellion against housework by "paying" it with a monthly allowance of £7-£8 as they had already done especially with those "wretched of the earth" who were dependent on pensions.

Now these uncertainties are largely dissipated.

And it is clear in any case that the demand for a wage for housework is only a basis, a perspective, from which to start, whose merit is essentially to link immediately female oppression, subordination and isolation to their material foundation: female exploitation. At this moment this is perhaps the major function of the demand of wages for housework.

This gives at once an indication for struggle, a direction in organizational terms in which oppression and exploitation, situation of caste and class, find themselves insolubly linked.

The practical, continuous translation of this perspective is the task the movement is facing in Italy and elsewhere.

17 There has been some confusion over what we have said about canteens. A similar confusion expressed itself in the discussions in other countries as well as Italy about wages for housework. As we explained earlier, housework is not institutionalized as factory work and our ultimate goal is to destroy both institutions. But aside from which demand we are speaking about, there is a misunderstanding of what a demand is. It is a goal which is not only a thing but, like capital at any moment, essentially a stage of antagonism of a social relation. Whether the canteen or the wages we win will be a victory or a defeat depends on the force of our struggle. On that force depends whether the goal is an occasion for capital to more rationally command our labor or an

occasion for us to weaken their hold on that command. What form the goal takes when we achieve it, whether it is wages or canteens or free birth control, emerges and is in fact created in the struggle, and registers the degree of power that we reached in that struggle.

18 Karl Marx, *Das Kapital*, Kritik der politischen Ökonomie, Band 1, Berlin, Dietz Verlag, 1962, p.512. "Large-scale industry makes it a question of life and death to replace that monstrosity which is a miserable available working population, kept in reserve for the changing needs of exploitation by capital, to replace this with the absolute availability of the individual for changing requisites of work; to replace the partial individual, a mere bearer of a social detail function, with the fully developed individual for whom varied social functions are modes of interplaying natural and acquired activities."

19 "But the other, more fundamental, objection, which we shall develop in the ensuing chapters, flows from our disputing the assumption that the general level of real wages is directly determined by the character of the wage bargain. We shall endeavor to show that primarily it is *certain other forces* which determine the general level of real wages. . . . We shall argue that there has been a *fundamental misunderstanding of how in this respect the economy in which we live actually works.*" (Emphasis added.) *The General Theory of Employment, Interest, and Money*, John Maynard Keynes, N.Y., Harcourt, Brace and World, 1964, p.13. "Certain other forces", in our view, are first of all women.

20 It has been noticed that many of the Bolsheviks after 1917 found female partners among the dispossessed aristocracy. When power continues to reside in men both at the level of the State and in individual relations, women continue to be "the spoil and handmaid of communal lust" (Karl Marx, *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, Progress Publishers, Moscow, 1959, p.94). The breed of "the new tsars" goes back a long way.

Already in 1921 from "Decisions of the Third Congress of the Communist International", one can read in Part I of "Work Among Women": "The Third Congress of the Comintern confirms the basic proposition of revolutionary Marxism, that is, that there is no 'specific woman question' and no 'specific women's movement', and that every sort of alliance of working women with bourgeois feminism, as well as any support by the women workers of the treacherous tactics of the social compromisers and opportunists, leads to the undermining of the forces of the proletariat. . . . In order to put an end to women's slavery it is necessary to inaugurate the new Communist organization of society."

The theory being male, the practice was to "neutralize". Let us quote from one of the founding fathers. At the first National Conference of Communist Women of the Communist Party of Italy on March 26, 1922, "Comrade Gramsci pointed out that special action must be organized among housewives, who constitute the large majority of the proletarian women. He said that they should be related in some way to our movement by our setting up special organizations. Housewives, as far as the quality of their work is concerned, can be considered similar to the artisans and therefore they

will hardly be communists; however, because they are the workers' mates, and because they share in some way the workers' life, they are attracted toward communism. Our propaganda can therefore have an influence over [sic] these housewives; it can be instrumental, if not to officer them into our organization, to neutralize them: so that they do not stand in the way of the possible struggles by the workers." (From *Compagna*, the Italian Communist Party organ for work among women, Year I, No.3 [April 2, 1922], p.2.)

## A Woman's Place

Today, more than ever before, magazines and newspapers are full of articles about women.

Some just discuss what the society women are doing and who of the upper class is getting married. Others discuss the fact that there is a high divorce rate and try to give some answer to all this. Or they discuss millions of women going into industry or the restlessness of housewives. These articles don't show what this restlessness means and can only try to make women feel that they are better off than they have ever been.

They plead with women to be happy.

None of these articles, none, points out that if women are in any way better off than ever before, that it is women who have made this change themselves. They don't point out that women want a change now and it is they who will make this change.

The method that these writers have in avoiding woman's role in making history is to avoid the daily lives of millions of women, what they do and what they think.

It is the day-to-day lives of women that show what women want and what they do not want.

Many of the writers of these articles are women, but career women who are not a part of the working women and housewives of this country. These writers realize that if they stated the facts, it would be a weapon for women in their struggle for

a new life for themselves and their families.

So they don't take up the daily pressures that women face. They don't take up the fact that women, dealing with these pressures in their own way, realize the strength of themselves and of other women. They avoid saying that women, feeling their own strength and doing away with the old relations, are preparing themselves and their husbands for a new and better relationship.

The co-authors of this booklet have seen this in their own lives and in the lives of the women they know. They have written this down as a beginning of the expression of what the average woman feels, thinks and lives.

## **The Single Woman**

A lot of women work before they get married and find that they are well able to take care of themselves. They are very independent as compared to single girls twenty years ago. They want to get married but they say their marriages will be different. They say they will not let themselves be the household drudges their mothers were. A friend of mine says that she is different from her mother because she wants more from marriage. "She didn't expect it. I'm different. I expect it."

Women want a part in the decisions that have to be made and very often they don't want to struggle along on one pay check. They prefer to continue work even if just for a while after they are married so that they can at least begin to have some of the things that they want and need.

One of the greatest problems a young single woman has to face aside from how to support herself, is what her attitude to morals she has been taught is going to be. In the process of working this out, single girls have started a whole new set of morals. Even though many girls have not thought about their actions in this way, they have gone against the whole code of morals that they were taught to live by. Many women have affairs before they are married and are not looked upon as fallen women or

bad women. It is not the same as one woman, years ago, going with a man and keeping it within herself. One girl told me that all of her friends had had sex relations with their boy friends and that they discussed it openly. They feel that they are entitled to this and are willing to go against the school authorities, their parents, and even those men who will not accept them. Whether or not society approves, they do what their friends are doing and insist upon approval by the force of the number who feel and act the same way.

### **"Hey, You're Scaring Me"**

A single woman thinks twice about getting married and giving up the freedom that she has had before marriage. Before, she went out as she pleased and bought clothes as she needed them. She never had the freedom that men have but she was on her own. One young woman of twenty that I work with says that she almost got married twice and she is certainly glad that she didn't. She told me, "I know how well off I am when I hear the married women talk about their husbands. I do what I want to do now." When she hears the married women talk, she says, "Hey, you're scaring me. You'll make me an old maid."

But all women want a home and family. This same girl is always talking about having children and about her boyfriends. Young women nowadays feel that their good times and the closeness that they have with their boyfriends should not end with marriage but should make their marriage into a real experience. It is clear that these girls don't reject men or marriage, but they reject what marriage is today.

## **The Married Woman**

As soon as a woman gets married she finds that she must settle down and accept responsibility, something women have always been trained to do. She realizes that she has the job of making the house that she and her husband live in a place where they can invite their friends and where they can relax after a hard day's work. And even though a woman works, it is assumed from

the very beginning that the main responsibility of the house is the woman's and the main job of support is the man's. The husband is to go out and support you and the children. You are to make sure that the house is clean, the children are cared for, meals are cooked, laundry is done, etc. This seems to be the fair way of doing things. But soon you find that the job of staying home and taking care of the house is not as it is painted in the movies. Housework is a never-ending job that is monotonous and repetitious. After a while doing things in the house such as ironing or getting up early to make lunches or breakfast is not something that you want to do. It becomes something that you have to do.

### The Children

Some couples try to get away from this division of the work at the beginning. For instance, when a woman works, the man will share the work when they get home. The husband of one woman did more of the housework than she did, before they had children.

But any idea of sharing the work disappears when children come. When there are children the whole set-up of a man working outside and a woman working inside is shown for what it is—an inhuman setup. The whole load of children, house, everything, becomes the woman's. As soon as a woman quits work to have children, a man doesn't feel he has to help her with anything. What was a division in their marriage when they first got married is now a split. Instead of the children uniting them, children divide a marriage and stick the woman in the house and glue the man to his job. But very often for a woman who works and looks forward to quitting when she has children, the coming of children makes working out of the home a life sentence. After a month or two, she is back working again.

Few men take an interest in the details of taking care of the baby. They feel it is not their job to diaper and bathe the children. Some men even feel that, though their wives have to stay home with the children, there is no reason for them to stay home with her. So they go out and do as they please, if their wives let them, knowing that their wives are stuck at home constantly

taking care of their children. If a man goes out with his friends, a woman usually fights for the right to go out with hers. One woman told me that she was pregnant and that she was sorry since she had a four-month-old baby. She said her husband was glad. She said that he knew that if she was stuck with a child he could go out as he pleased. Fewer and fewer women take this nonsense from their husbands. Women fight tooth and nail against being shouldered with the whole responsibility of the house and the children. They refuse to stay home and be tied to the house while their husbands continue life as though nothing had happened. If women are going to stay home their husbands are going to stay home with them.

### The Family is Divided

Women are trying to break down the division that has been made between the father and the children and between the mother and the father. The privilege that society has given the man, women are not allowing him. It is a privilege that he suffers by as well as she. Men know little about their children, are not close to them, and don't know what giving time and work to a child gives back to you. It is this giving that a woman does that makes her so much closer to her children than a father ever can be. Men feel that supporting a child is all they have to do to get the love of their child and the respect of their wife. They feel that nothing else should be asked of them—but the less that is asked of them the less they get in return.

It is not an easy thing for a woman to get used to being a mother. For one thing you know that you are responsible for this child completely. If your husband stops supporting him then you have to. You have to raise him. No one else will. Whatever kind of person he grows up to be will be mainly your doing. As soon as you have a child you have to make your marriage work. Now it is not only you but another person who didn't ask to be born who will suffer if your marriage goes on the rocks. A lot of marriages that would ordinarily break up are held together by the woman in order to save her child from a broken home.

A woman's whole life revolves around her children. She thinks of them first. She finds that these are the only people in her life

who really need her. If she has nothing more, she lives for them. She organizes her work so she can give them the best care. The schedule that she lives on shows that her time is not her own but belongs to her children. She must often go without things so that they will have what they need. She must try to live in a house that is safe enough and roomy enough for them. Sometimes she even has to fight with her husband for something that she feels they need and he is not willing for them to have. She plans her life according to their age.

It is easy for a man to say it is his child but for the real worry when they are sick or misbehave, how they are eating and how much they sleep, these things are on the woman's shoulders. How a child's shoes fit him, where his clothes are kept, even things like this most fathers don't know anything about. This doesn't mean that fathers like it this way. It's just that even if they didn't there is very little that they can do about it. When they go away in the morning, the kids are usually asleep and when they get home at night they are near their bed time. Their whole lives are concerned with making a living, and the problems involved in that. Because they are not around their children enough, they have very little idea about what children need, not only in the way of physical needs, but in terms of discipline and love and security. The division that is made between home and factory creates a division between the father and his children. It is obvious that when the father and mother lead separate lives, the children as well are going to suffer. They are often used by each parent as weapons against the other. The children seldom know where they stand and try as soon as possible to get away from it all. They refuse to be a part of this constant family war and just disassociate themselves from it as soon as they are old enough.

### Then the Kids Come Home

The work that is part of having a child destroys much of the pleasure of having them for the one that has to do the work. To be with the children day in and day out, week in and week out, to clean up after them, and to keep them clean, to worry about whether they are going in the street or are catching a cold is not only a terrible strain, but it becomes the only thing that you see in your child—the work and the worry involved. You begin to

see in the child only the work and none of the pleasure. You feel that every stage of his growing up means, not just a developing child but more work for you to do. You see a child as a hindrance to your getting your other work done and to your having free time. He seems to be "in your way" rather than part of your life. Just about the time that you think you're finished cleaning the house, the kids come home and the whole routine starts all over again, finger marks on the wall, muddy shoes and scattered toys.

You don't ever realize how much of a barrier the work of raising a child creates until he finally gets into his teens. He is less work to you and you have more time and more of a chance to appreciate him as a person. But then it is too late. He has grown away from you and you can't really see him and know him and appreciate him.

If a woman can't make her husband understand this (and since a man doesn't go through it, it is very hard for him to understand), she must literally force out of him some free time away from the children for herself. This doesn't solve anything but it relieves the tension for a while. Sometimes men don't want their wives to have any freedom at all. They don't trust them or have some old-fashioned idea that they don't need it or shouldn't have it. The only people you can turn to in those situations are your neighbors. Very often, they are the only people who understand, since they are women too and have the same problems. For a small amount of money or for an exchange of care, they may be willing to take care of your child for an afternoon. Even then you are not really free. When you are away you may worry about whether the children are being taken good care of. Sometimes you even feel guilty about having left them at all. No one ever lets you forget that you should be home with your children. You can never really be free of them if you are a mother. Nor can you be free when you are with them. A woman finds out early that what she wanted from having children she cannot have. Her situation, her husband's and the children's, put the children in immediate conflict with her.

When a woman has children, she is tied down to the house and to these same children that are so important to her. You never know what it is to be a housewife until you have children.



## The House

Everything a housewife does, she does alone. All the work in the house is for you to do by yourself. The only time you are with other people is when you have visitors or go visiting yourself. People think sometimes that when women go visiting they are just wasting time. But if they didn't go visiting occasionally, they would go mad from boredom and the feeling of not having anyone to talk to. It's so good to get out among people. The work is the same, day in and day out. "Even if you died the house would still be there in the morning." Sometimes you get so bored that you have to do something. One woman used to change the furniture around about every two weeks. Other women buy something new for the house or for themselves. There are a million schemes to break the monotony. The daytime radio serials help to pass the time away but nothing changes the isolation and boredom.

The terrible thing that is always there when you are doing the housework is the feeling that you are never finished. When a man works in a factory, he may work hard and long hours. But at a certain time, he punches out and for that day at least he is finished. Come Friday or Saturday night he is through for one or two days. In the house you are never finished. Not only is there always something to be done, but there is always someone to mess up almost before you are finished. After four or six hours of a thorough housecleaning the kids will come home and in five minutes the house will be a shambles. Or your husband will dirty all the ash trays there are in the house. Or it will rain right after you wash the windows. You may be able to control your children or get your husband to be more careful, but that doesn't solve much. The way that the house is set up, neither the husband nor the children have any idea how much effort and real hard work and time have gone into cleaning the house. The way that the house is set up you have no control over the hours of work, the kind of work that you will have to do, and how much work you do. These are what women want to control.

The rest of the family is no part of the house. They just live there. You make the home what it is—a place where they can relax. You make it livable. You make it attractive. You make it

comfortable. You keep it clean. And you are the only one who can never completely enjoy it. You always have your eye out for what has to be done. And picking up after people seems to be a never-ending job. You can never relax where you spend most of your time, energy and ability.

Most women don't even make the real decisions where the house is concerned. Even though they can use their own judgment on many small things, the really big things are either decided outright by the husband or he makes sure that his pressure is felt. Women feel that they must have a say in the house. They participate in the decisions of the house more than ever today. But they have had to put up a long fight to get this recognition.

## "Your own boss"

They say a woman is her own boss. That is, no one tells her how fast to work. No one tells her how much to do. And nobody stands over her all day. She can sit down when she wants to and smoke a cigarette or eat when she gets hungry.

A housewife has an entirely different kind of a boss. Her first boss is her husband's work. Everything a woman has to do is dependent on the job her husband has. Whatever her husband makes, that is what the family has to live on. How much clothes she buys, or whether she has to make them, whether clothes go to the laundromat or are washed by hand, whether they live in a crowded apartment or in a house with enough room for the family, whether she has a washing machine or does clothes by hand, all of these things are decided by the kind of job her husband has.

The hours that her husband works determines her whole schedule and how she will live, and when she will do her work. One big problem for a woman is having a husband who works nights. Then there is no schedule. By the time that the housework is done, her husband gets up and the house is messed again. If there are children then there are two schedules to be met. The children have to be kept quiet during the day, which is

almost impossible with children.

Whether her husband has a comparatively easy job or a hard one affects her life, too. A man who works very hard is not going to help her with any of the work around the house. He is going to come home a lot grouchier and harder to live with. The woman has to learn to keep her temper a lot more if there is to be any peace. And the children have to be kept in line more, too.

Even where she lives is decided by her husband's work. The part of town that makes going to work the easiest is the part of town that you live in. And if there are no jobs in that town that are in your husband's line of work then you have to forget all your friends and all the ties of family and you go to where he can find work.

The children and the demands of taking care of them is the next decider of how a woman is to spend her life. There is nothing, nothing more demanding than an infant. When they want something, they want it at that moment and not a moment later.

But the most ruthless boss and the one that really keeps a woman going is the work itself. The work does not look on you as being a human being. It is there no matter how you feel or what you want to do. It dominates every spare moment that you have, either in the house or away from it. You are constantly trying to finish work that has no end. You want to do all that you have to do in the least possible time and have free time for yourself. And after you think you are finished you find that there is something else. Sometimes women will give up and let the house go for a few days or a few hours. But they are the ones who are bothered by it. And then they will work twice as hard trying to make up for lost time. You are always doing what you have to do. What you want to do doesn't count for much.

Most women are very responsible. They feel that, as mothers and wives, they want to do the best possible jobs. They want to be proud of their homes and children. There is no other place where they can show what they can do. If a woman is a good manager she has the respect of other women and that is impor-

tant to any woman.

So there is really no need of a foreman or lead girl at home. It is the way a woman lives and the work that she must do that keeps her toeing the mark. It is this way of life also that teaches her discipline. She learns when to say something and when to keep quiet. She learns to do things on her own. If there is something that has to be done and her husband won't do it, she does it herself. One woman with four children painted the whole outside of her house. She said that she didn't want to wait another five years for her husband to do it.

### It Takes Experience

Every time a woman's husband gets a raise she says to herself, now I will catch up. That extra few dollars will change things. But, by the time he gets that raise, prices have jumped to make up for it, or he has been sick and lost a day's pay, or there has been an "extra". And even if things have gone along fairly smoothly, you go and buy the things that you have needed all along but just weren't able to afford before. So you are right back where you started from. Almost all workers' families live from day to day. There is very little chance to put something away for an emergency. If a family missed just one paycheck it may set them back for weeks. In all that time the housewife must manage somehow. The same thing happens when the working man goes out on strike. For weeks and sometimes months she must manage on practically nothing. The miners' wives have a system of storing food and clothes away when their husbands are working steady. In that way, when there is a strike they can live for a while at least on what they have saved up in the way of food and clothes. It takes a lot of experience and training to learn all the tricks and the woman is the only one in a position to learn these "tricks". Corners can be cut in an emergency that you never thought could be cut and you somehow manage.

A woman has to get along on what her husband makes. It doesn't matter how much or how little he brings home. She must decide when to make clothes and when she can afford to buy them. She finds recipes for making economical meals that at the same time look and taste good. The way the family lives, whether

there are bill collectors at the door, or food on the table, is dependent on how much money her husband gives her and how she manages it. Although most husbands realize that prices are high, they don't really know how much it takes to keep a family going. It is only the woman who has to live on impossibly little who knows about how to manage finances.

All of this experience prepares a woman to manage when she is on her own. The woman whose husband runs out on her has a pretty rough job on her hands, especially if she has children. If she has relatives who will help her at the beginning then she is considered lucky. But on the whole she has to be both mother and a father to the children. She has no choice about working. She assumes the responsibility of both a man and woman. She supports her family on what she makes, which is usually much less than a man makes. She has less time with her children and sometimes has to be separated from them in order to be able to work. Yet these women manage to bring up their children and start new lives for themselves. They don't sit home and weep. My friend has a neighbor whose husband ran out on her and left her with a child and all the bills. This woman sold all the furniture and with the money took a trip to Puerto Rico to see her mother. It was something to meet her. If she cried, you didn't know about it. She just said that she wasn't going to wait around like a damn fool. She had never done anything like that before but when the time came, she knew just what to do.

### They Just Lead Separate Lives

A woman stays at home alone all day. She waits for her husband to come home to tell him of the things that have happened during the day, something that the kids have done or said that shows what wonderful kids they are, or what a hard day she had. She wants to hear what he has gone through and what he thinks about buying this or that for the house. But his life is not in the house. When a man comes home from work, he wants to do nothing. Sometimes he doesn't even want to do any talking. You wait all day for someone to talk to, and then when your husband comes home he picks up the paper and acts as if he doesn't even know you exist. When a woman is home all day, she wants to go out to a show or for a drive on Sunday afternoon. But during the

week your husband comes home exhausted and even on weekends he sometimes wants to stay home and relax. He has been away from the house most of his waking hours. Now is his chance to sit around. Women have needs of companionship and understanding that men know nothing about.

If there is not that understanding between men and women about their work and human needs, it is not surprising that many marriages can't make a go of their sex lives, the most delicate phase of their relationship. Their husbands, the people they should be closest to, women are furthest away from. They just lead separate lives.

### Women Know Each Other

If women can't turn to their husbands, then they turn to other women. Because of the fact that women lead such similar lives, they know and understand each other. In the neighborhood some women will get very close to others. These women in a court or a street will help each other out if they need help and make the time of day go faster. They talk of things they would not dream of talking to their husbands about, even if their husbands would listen. Who can tell a man how they want to fix up a house or what they want to buy for the children? Things like problems with your husband or financial problems are "common property". The women discuss all the things that affect their lives—whether or not to have children and how many to have, how to save money on clothes, housewares and food, which stores have lower prices, the best method of birth control, sex problems, going to work. In the discussions many things are resolved. Women get new attitudes as a result of hearing other women talk. The women will exclude someone from their group because she is not doing what is expected of her. A mother who neglects her child or does not take care of the house and has no excuse for it will not have the time or confidence of the other women.

Some people call this gossiping but it's much more than that. Women are breaking down the isolation of the home by creating strong ties with other women. It is the only group life a housewife can have and she makes the most of it. The very existence of

these ties with other housewives is condemnation of the relations a woman has with her husband, with her work, and with the rest of society. The women come together, talk together, and, in a way, live together. There is no one else they can turn to but themselves. Here is one place where they can decide whom they will be with, where they will be, and what they will do. There is no one who will stand in the way.

The best time of the week in my court is Friday. Everybody cleans house on Friday so they will have less to do on the week-end. After they are finished, in the afternoon, someone will run out for beer and we will sit around and talk and relax and compare notes. The sociability is at its highest and we all feel most relaxed when the work is done. There is a feeling of closeness and kidding around that you can't get anywhere else except with these people that know you and accept you on your own terms.

This is how women are organized. With the experience they have in managing things and with the aid of the other women in their group, they know what to do when they want to take action. The women in a housing project in San Francisco got together to halt the rise in prices. They saw the government wasn't doing anything so they took matters into their own hands. They held meetings and demonstrations and distributed leaflets. No one person organized it. After living with their neighbors in a housing project for so long they knew each other intimately; each other's weaknesses and strengths. The women made price lists up of every store in town and bought at only those stores that had the lowest prices. The whole city knew about "Mama's OPA" and the papers had many articles on it.<sup>1</sup>

There are many times that the housewives take actions that never reach the papers. Women will barricade streets so that their children will have a place to play. The police with tear gas bombs can not drive them away. Women will pass the word along to other women that on a certain day no woman is to buy meat. They would just walk up to strange women and say "Don't buy meat on such a day". Women know each other so well that they can talk to a perfect stranger and be sure of being understood. The miners' wives went out on strike to protest the company selling their homes and again to protest the dust in the air of the

mining towns. They got the support of their husbands in both cases. Their husbands refused to cross their picket lines.

Women act as a group because they are treated like one. They live the same way on the whole, no matter how different the individual situation may be.

### A New Relationship

The most universal organization of women is the action that women take in their own homes. Each woman in her own home is making a revolution. There are some women who don't say much to their husbands or to other women. Yet, when it comes to a showdown, they just go ahead and do what they know is right. Other women argue with their husbands for the things they feel they should have. These arguments mean something to a woman. She is not *just* arguing with her husband. She is showing him and even more important, herself, that she has ideas and desires of her own. Women are constantly telling men however they can that they can't go on in the old way. It is this spirit of independence and self-respect that men admire in women, even when it is directed against themselves. They admire a woman who can stand on her own two feet and doesn't let her husband walk all over her. A woman who doesn't take it from her husband has the respect of other women and she has the respect of her husband as well.

Women are more and more refusing to be just machines for raising children and getting their husbands off to work. They demand more of their husbands in the way of a relationship. If a man cannot change, they will break up the marriage rather than go on living with a stranger. Divorce nowadays is accepted because women have made it acceptable. It is clear that it is not the individual man who is involved. There are too many divorces for that. When a woman gets divorced, although it takes the form of a struggle with an individual man, it is an act opposing the whole way of life men and women must lead in our day.

Women fight the role that men play in the home. This has nothing to do with how much a husband helps his wife or how good he is to the children. No matter how much a husband tries

to understand the woman's problems, no matter how well they get along, women fight the way they are forced to live and want to establish a new way of life.

## The Working Woman

One of the ways that women show their rejection of their role in society is by going out to work. Many women work today who have never worked before. By going out to work, women have changed their relations with their husbands and children. Along with this, they have given themselves new problems to solve and have found new ways to solve them.

Women have expanded their experiences so that they know what large groups of people are thinking and doing. Fewer and fewer women today are housewives only. Most women at one time or another go to work. Some women go out to work only a few months a year. Some work steady. In any case, they have a picture of the world that they never had before.

Some women that I have worked with say that they work because they can't get along on what their husbands make. This is true especially in the family where the man has no trade and his wages are small. But it is more and more true of everyone. Besides the high cost of living, there is another reason why it is hard to get along on one paycheck today. Women demand much more than they used to. They don't want to go through the awful feeling of being broke that they went through during the depression. They don't want to wash clothes by hand when, with a little extra, they can have the most modern equipment in their homes. Everything now is modern and women want the most modern appliances to work with. About the only thing you can do on one paycheck is exist.

When you are living on a small budget, it is the woman who must bear the brunt of it. She must go long distances to shop. When it becomes necessary to do without, she is usually the first person to forget her own needs.

One of the biggest financial needs that a woman has is some financial independence. They don't want to ask their husbands before they spend any money. They want to have money of their own. To be able to afford new drapes when the old ones are still good but you are tired of looking at them, is a luxury that most women can't afford but all women want. The paycheck that your husband gives you, although you work as hard for it as he does, is never really your own, even though it may be handed to you for the needs of the family. These needs that women have can never be satisfied on the money that the working man alone brings home.

A woman who goes to work in a factory has a feeling of independence not only about the money that is spent but about the decisions that are made in the house. If you are helping to support the family, you have more right to decide not only what is to be done with the family money, but you now want to have more of a part in other questions that come up in the family which your husband has always decided before. One particular man was so surprised with the rights his wife took since she started to work that he told her to stay home. They got along better that way, he said.

It is not only decisions that a woman feels more independent about. When a woman works she knows that she doesn't have to put up with a lot of things from her husband. If he steps out of line by drinking or going out with other women, then she will up and leave him faster than before. She figures that now, if she has to, she can always support herself.

One of the things that drives women to get jobs is the boredom and loneliness that they would have to live with if they stayed home. Women want to be with other people. As compared to her husband, a woman leads an isolated life in the house by herself. The only company that she has while she is home is the radio and the telephone. In the factory you at least work with other people and get away from the boredom and loneliness that is home life.

The thing that a woman regrets most when she goes out to work is leaving her children. It is true that you want to get away from them for a while, but you don't like to leave them with just

anybody. Most of the time you don't know much about how they are being taken care of. If they are older, you don't know who they go around with and what they do with their time. If your child is in a nursery school, you can ask the teacher how the child is doing. Most of the time she will say, "Fine". But that's all. You really don't know how they are being treated or what kind of care they are getting. You always hope the child is doing the right thing but when you work, you are never sure.

There is also the problem of where to leave the child when you work. Many women who are separated from their husbands and have young children, have to board them out. They miss their children who seem to grow up without them. They don't have much say in the way their children are brought up. Other women prefer to depend on neighbors whom they know rather than a nursery school that they know little or nothing about. The reason that a lot of women don't go to work at all is because they have no one reliable to take care of their children.

#### Wherever She Wants to Be

Women want to be able to decide whether or not to work. If a man tells a woman to work she usually won't. For one thing she feels that if she works when he tells her to then he gets used to it, and sometimes stops working regularly himself. He thinks that she should support him. One woman I know had to stop working because her husband thought that he could go out gambling with the money that she was making. On the other hand, if her husband tells her not to work, that doesn't mean that she will stay home. When a woman goes out to work it is not always with the approval of her husband. Many men resent their wives working. They use as an excuse the fact that the children should stay with their mother. They also say that they are not able to help their wives with the children and with the house and shopping. Others will make it so unbearable by putting the entire burden on their wives that finally the wives will be forced to quit.

Women have to fight those men who believe that a woman's place is in the home, and that is where they should stay. These are the men who don't want their wives to have any independence at all, and who want to be the only ones who bring in a check

so they are the only ones with a say in their homes. When a woman goes out to work, they know that she becomes much more of a person in her own right. Women have shown these men that a woman's place is wherever she wants to be.

Those women who want to go on working and whose husbands don't want them to, don't tell their husbands about how hard it is to work. They keep all of that to themselves. One woman on our line at work has to fight to keep working. She has a fourteen-year-old daughter and she says there is nothing to keep her home. Yet her husband, a professional, who makes good money, is constantly asking her to quit. She never shows how tired she is when she gets home and she can't afford to ask him for help or he will make her quit.

There is quite a difference in the feeling toward women working between those women who have to work and those who work because they want to. If a woman works because she wants to, she doesn't have to take as much from the company and she can tell the boss to go to hell with his job, as my neighbor puts it. When she gets tired of working, she knows she can quit, and even if she doesn't quit, the very fact that she can makes her more independent of the company.

Those women who have to work, the single women who are supporting themselves and sometimes their parents, or the divorced women who are supporting their children, must stick to their jobs no matter how they feel or what they feel like doing. When these women get tired of working, they just go right on working. They have no choice. The company usually takes full advantage of this and knows it can depend on these women for Saturday work and overtime. When you are paying ten or fifteen dollars a week for nursery school alone, every penny counts.

Factory work for women is sometimes easy work—that is, it is not hard physically. But, like all factory work, it is dull and monotonous. In certain industries, it is hard physically. You feel in every muscle that you have put in a day's work. The important thing, no matter what kind of work you do, is the people you work with. If the work is easy but dull, then it is the other

women who make the day pass at all. If it is hard work, the only thing that keeps you going is the other women who are doing the same thing you are and going through it with you. It is not the work that is so important to you and that makes factory life bearable. It is the people with whom you work that you care about.

There is always something going on at the plant. Either someone is cracking a joke or clowning or you are having a fight with the foreman or lead girl. There is always a discussion going on about something, and everything is talked about. Sex problems or their current affairs, housework and how to manage the children, new dance steps and the latest styles, price control and housing, ways of gaining and losing weight. No matter what you want to talk about, there is someone to talk to. The girls consider each other's feelings and interests.

Unlike the company, the girls care about each other. When one person is out, she is missed and someone usually calls to find out what is the matter. If something is seriously wrong with a particular girl, then her immediate group of friends start a collection to buy her something or to give her money to pay the extra bills. The girls give freely of their time and their money. If a girl is not feeling well a certain day, then the other girls or some special friends will work twice as fast to make up for her work so that she doesn't have to miss time from work. The company never worries about the individual person. They expect, come hell or high water, the same amount of work every day. The girls are the only ones who care about each other and will help you out when you need it.

### We--From Now On

When a woman comes home from work at night, there is quite a difference from when a man comes home from work. As soon as she comes home she starts working all over again. A married woman, especially if she has children, can never have the luxury of sitting down and doing nothing. There is dinner to get on the table, the dishes to be washed, the children to be bathed and gotten to bed. She has two jobs. She is a part-time mother and housewife and a full-time wage earner. The weekend which a man

takes to relax, for her belongs to the house. And all the things that have been left undone during the week have to be done then.

It's a hard grind, working and having a family. No matter how much your husband helps you or how considerate he is, the main burden of the house is still on the woman's shoulders. Just because a woman goes out to work, it doesn't mean she stops being a housewife.

A woman has a lot more in common with her husband when she works than when she stays home. There is more to talk to him about than there was before. The main barrier is still there, however, and it is still easier to talk to other women than it is to talk to your husband. Yet, things are definitely changed for a couple. For the first time, a woman says, you are not supporting this house. *We* are. And things will have to be *we* from now on.

### Union and Company Women

The union and the company try to appear fair by putting up women for supervisory jobs. The shop stewards and the union officials are often women. The lead girls of the company and the foreladies are often taken from the line in plants. But as soon as these girls are taken off the line, they forget the rest of the girls and become agents of the union or the company, very often against the girls. The lead girls usually eat together and go out together and consider themselves better than the rest. They act just like the men supervisors. But they use the fact that they are women to try to win the confidence of the other girls in order to get more production and to keep the girls in line.

One of the lead girls in my plant was asked by the supervisor to get out double production. She said she would never do that to the girls and cried like a baby for days. It never dawned on her that the only way she could get the supervisor to stop pressing her was to get the girls to protest. She handled it herself and in a few days was demanding that the girls produce, using the excuse that she had been pressured into it. Most women feel that when a woman gets to be boss, she is worse than a man. The women who get in as bosses constantly use the fact that they are women to whip the girls into line. The women union officials are the

same way.

Men workers talk about how the union is separated from the men. If this is true of the men's unions, it is doubly true of the women's. To many women it seems that the only thing that they do is collect dues and try to keep the girls in line for the company. The initiation fees are way out of proportion to the amounts that the women make and the dues are just as high. In some shops nobody knows who the shop steward is and very few of the girls care. Yet the girls will defend the union if the company attacks it. They know, however, that if anything is to be done, they will have to do it themselves.

Most women look at work as six of one and half a dozen of the other. If it is a choice of staying home in the monotony of the house, then they feel that it is worthwhile working. Some women look forward to the day when they can afford to stay home. When that day comes, they leave the plant only to come right back most of the time. After you have worked out, even for a little while, it is hard to go back into the home. This is what happened to a lot of women during the war, who worked in defense plants. After the war, many were laid off, but some stayed. Those who were laid off and many, many more women who have never worked before are becoming working women. A woman's place is becoming wherever she wants to be.

It is not that women enjoy work. *They like the work in neither the home nor the factory.* But as compared to being "just a housewife" most women feel that even factory work is preferable. My neighbor went out to work for Christmas money, and because she wanted to get away from the house for a while, but Christmas money was her excuse to her husband. Her three-year-old boy stays with his godparents so her husband has no complaint about her working. Every once in a while, she says she is quitting but she just can't get herself to do it.

### Every Woman Knows

More and more today, women are showing by their every action that they can't go on in the old way. They have no confidence any more that what is supposed to work really will, or

what is supposed to be their lives, should be. Their husbands, their children, their work, all are in conflict with them. Everything they do, every decision they make, they feel *may work*. Marriage, children, home, none of these things are women sure of any more.

Housewives who have never worked before are waiting until their children are old enough so they can get a job. Women who have always worked are looking forward to the day when they can finally quit. Marriages that have lasted for twenty years are breaking up. Young couples, after six months of marriage decide that they'd better end it now before they have children who will suffer. Young women getting out of high school, instead of running to get married, get a job and an apartment of their own and live independently.

It is not that women don't want to be wives and mothers. They want and need men to share their lives with and every woman wants children. But they feel that if they can't have a human relationship they will have no relationship at all. Women go from being married to being divorced, from being housewives to working out, but nowhere do women see the kind of life that they want for themselves and their families.

Women are finding more and more that there is no way out but a complete change. But one thing is already clear. Things can't go on the way they are. Every woman knows that.

Selma James

"A Woman's Place" was first published in the United States, February 1953, by *Correspondence*, a group organized around the publication of a workers' newspaper. Pseudonyms (Marie Brant and Ellen Santori) were used because of the particular form of political repression by the American State during the McCarthy era.

### NOTE

1 This name came from the government department which was supposed to control prices during the second world war, the Office of Price Administration—OPA.



# ALL WORK AND NO PAY

## Women, Housework & the Wages Due

This book describes women's lives and struggles through the speeches and writings of different women from many countries. It shows how all women—young or old, single or married, with or without children, 'straight' or lesbian—whatever else they do, are housewives. It makes clear how universal is women's need for a wage for housework, and that an international movement of women demanding the 'wages due' is not only possible but already a reality.

Contributors include:—Rose Craig, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Mala Dhondy, Wendy Edmond, Suzie Fleming, Polda Fortunati, Frances Gregory, Jane Hirschmann, Una Howe, Selma James, Ellen Jensen, Los Angeles Wages for Housework Committee, Joyce Luck, Bernadette Maharaj, Patricia Matthews, Power of Women Collective, Esther Ronay, Monica Sjoo, Lizzie Stuart, Wages Due Collective.

Edited by Wendy Edmond and Suzie Fleming

Published by the Power of Women Collective and  
the Falling Wall Press

128pp.

*Other Wages for Housework publications are available, both in English and in other languages. For further information about these publications, and about the international campaign for Wages for Housework, in the following and other countries, write to:—*

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