

Commentary:

Unpaid Domestic Labour and the Effect it has Upon the Economy.

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Abstract:

A chef prepares a meal for four, creating the flavours and sustenance for a group of four; a housekeeper disinfects surfaces, cleans, and mops flooring and launders bedding, linens and even clothing depending on the hotel or service, to ensure cleanliness in their client's lives. Early childhood educators change the diaper of a two-year-old child while also providing the basis for educational growth with reading, numbers, and speech. These professions share a core commonality; they are only a fraction of the duties performed as what is known as "domestic labour", all without pay. But is this fair? Or should this labour be compensated like other labour is in our society? This article argues that they should be fairly compensated; without this labour, how would any of us manage to make it to work or school or even survive? Domestic labour plays a vital role in society and deserves fair compensation.

Unpaid Domestic Labour & its Impact

The primary reason that individuals work is to earn a wage; to exchange our labour for monetary gain is the basic principle of employment. However, when engaging in unpaid domestic labour, the purpose shifts from gaining wages to providing for a new life, and a future worker (Warren, 2011). How can that new role not be compensated adequately considering the breadth of services and jobs covered by the domestic labourer? By not compensating the domestic labour that people perform while rearing and essentially training the new generation of workers, we are telling domestic labourers that their labour does not matter.

According to the Gender & Work Database (n.d., Para 2), "Unpaid work refers to the production of goods or services that are consumed by those within or outside a household, but not for sale in the market. An activity is considered "work" (vs. "leisure") if a third person could be paid to do a certain activity." By this understanding, a broader view of the potential income being lost by those participating in domestic labour really begins to take shape. It is interesting to note the last part of

the quote that concerns work vs. leisure and the stipulation of a third person/party being able to be paid to perform the task. For example, how often have we heard from our mothers (and fathers as well), that they are not a taxi? Or that this isn't a restaurant, we eat what we are served? However, using the definition provided by the Gender & Work Database, it turns out that our parents were wrong; they really **were** taxi drivers and chefs, just unpaid ones. Now imagine that our parents were being compensated for the roles in which they were performing; earning an income that matches, even loosely, that of which professionals in said fields earn. The income lost from having a parent home, performing unpaid domestic labour is not insignificant; again, the Gender & Work Database provides context (n.d., Para 9),

Although unpaid informal caregiving benefits society, as well as caregivers and care recipients, it still lacks social recognition and is not counted as part of a country's productive output. Feminist economists estimate that, were it to be counted, this type of work would account for at least half of a given country's total Gross National Product (GNP)

To put this in perspective, looking at the economic losses at a national level as opposed to a familial unit perspective, according to Trading Economics.com (2018),

Gross National Product in Canada increased to 2195332 CAD Million in the second quarter of 2018 from 2168636 CAD Million in the first quarter of 2018. Gross National Product in Canada averaged 772819.32 CAD Million from 1961 until 2018, reaching an all time high of 2195332 CAD Million in the second quarter of 2018 and a record low of 39836 CAD Million in the first quarter of 1961.

Unpaid domestic labour is estimated to be half that number according to the Gender Database; a staggering amount of missed product. The economic boost that would be provided to Canada (never mind all the other countries that share a similar outlook on domestic labour,) would be significant to put it mildly; the effect on families could very well be the difference between working poverty and comfortable middle class if this loss were to be addressed in a meaningful way.

Measures of Loss to the Economy

But how do we measure how much income exactly we are losing to domestic labour on a family-by-family basis, or something similar and easier to wrap our heads around number wise? According to Covert (2012),

How do you figure out the value of those hours spent in the home, where no one ever earns wages for wiping noses or countertops? The paper simply calculates what it would cost to pay a domestic worker to do the work. The value for individual families is big: it increases personal income 30 percent. But the effect on the economy is also huge. If this work were incorporated when measuring GDP, it would have raised it by 26 percent in 2010.

Covert argues (2021) that essentially, one should look at what a paid professional for the role performed would earn and assume that to be the income that is being lost by having someone perform unpaid domestic labour in the home. There is a caveat here that presents itself; the many roles performed as domestic labour have several differing pay scales.

Going back to the introduction to this paper, the roles of chef, cleaner and Early Childhood Educator were picked out of the many roles performed as unpaid domestic labour; each having wildly different pay scales, but all as vital as the next in the healthy growth of children that require the existence of domestic labour. According to Payscale.com, each of the roles has an annual average income in Ontario of the following.

Chef: \$53, 115

Cleaner: \$15.72/Hr (Approx. \$31, 440/Year assuming full-time at 50 weeks/Year)

Early Childhood Educator: \$16.69/Hour (Approx. \$33, 380/Year assuming full-time at 50 weeks/year)

Now, it is unlikely and unrealistic to assume that in order to provide compensation for domestic labour, we would simply combine the average salaries for every single role performed by a stay-at-home mother/father and simply pay that. For the 3 roles used in the above example, that would be over \$100, 000/year in salary, more than many middle-class earners currently make working full-time. However, perhaps an average of salary from the myriad of roles performed by a domestic labourer would be a more economically manageable figure; somewhere in the area of \$40-\$45, 000/year; something closer to what would be earned by an average worker.

When a person (usually a woman), leaves the workforce to provide unpaid domestic labour, it is not only the immediate family that is losing out on income generated by that person. The economy also loses out; once someone is engaged in unpaid domestic labour, they are limiting their ability to engage in capitalist consumerism. Without an income (or, having a family drop to a single income), a person is unable to spend, the backbone of an economy. By acknowledging that unpaid domestic labour amounts to a tangible loss to families and economic growth, and by also implementing a meaningful form of payment for said labour (as opposed to the paltry 55% of wages that E.I will pay for maternity leave in Canada (see Government of Canada, 2021), families will benefit in real, measurable ways financially which in turn enables a large portion of currently inactive people to become active in the economy.

Gender and Domestic Labour

The other aspect of unpaid domestic labour comes in the form of gender and oppression. Traditionally, women are the ones expected to leave the workforce once children arrive and require someone at home to perform said labour. Anderson (2000) states,

It is women who bear the brunt of the public/private distinction- as housewives, confined to the ‘private’ and unrecognised workplace, and as workers who must juggle the double day, working around childcare and domestic duties.” (p. 19)

The double day; the expectation that a woman will provide care, nurturing and emotional/physical support for children while also earning a wage at a job is a wholly unrealistic ideal that is further perpetuated by the lack of compensation for domestic labour in the private. Too often we hear of

mothers that are constantly tired, longing for time to themselves or a moment of rest due to the demands of child rearing, being a wife/partner and maintaining a career to provide alongside their partner.

Now, imagine that we as a culture decided to acknowledge the effort and time that women pour into providing domestic labour for which they lose out on quality of life and financial gain (potentially) and began to compensate these mothers. The double day would disappear; it would certainly at least lessen in its harmful effect upon the welfare of women that experience it. No longer would mothers have to juggle the demands of domestic labour and paid labour. They could, instead, focus on providing domestic labour to their families, while also providing monetary support to the family without the burden of two separate selves working all the time. For the women that do not juggle a double day, they would have access to money that was previously missing to them. Rather than depend on the pittance that E.I provides alongside their partner's single income; these women would be able to contribute meaningfully to the economic status of their family. These efforts would give a form of power back to women that is currently lacking; no longer would unpaid domestic labour be expected and unacknowledged, but it would be paid and empowered as a worth pursuit that is equal to going off to a workplace.

Conclusion

While unpaid domestic labour affects mainly women, it influences all facets of economic involvement. As shown, the boost to the economy by providing a new source of meaningful financial support to currently unpaid domestic labourers would improve the overall financial health of Canada, providing more spenders to the market which in turn would empower industry and services in our culture. As it stands, the lack of financial recognition continues to hinder the empowerment of women and stymies the financial growth and security of families that must live with the uncertainty created by having to force a family member to assume either unpaid domestic labour or, even worse, to assume a double day of unpaid domestic labour alongside a paid source of employment. Domestic labour needs to be recognized for what it really is; essential to the growth of the market and of families and deserving of compensation as real labour.

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