An anthology of radical feminist writings from the current women's movement. Forty-five articles ranging from the personal to the theoretical and drawn largely from the feminist annual NOTES.
Housework: Slavery or Labor of Love

by Betsy Warrior

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In every period of labor reform, the lot of the houseworker has lain outside the sphere of interest of reformers and radicals alike, and has remained untouched by any improvements accruing to those workers whose jobs are outside the home. This continues to be the case today. Energy is being directed at improving the conditions of migrant workers, minority groups in the labor force, and even women if they happen to be in the “outside” labor force, i.e., in work situations analogous to male workers. No such energy is being directed at the situation of the household worker. The oppression of females who work outside the home is more easily recognizable because general standards that are accepted for male workers can theoretically be applied to females also. Thus their inequality in relation to male workers can be exposed. There are no such standards for houseworkers nor has the labor they perform ever been recognized as such.

The most obvious reason that no attention has been given to the situation of the houseworker is simply the fact that men aren’t engaged in this work. As this position is unique to women, men don’t see any direct benefit for themselves in the improvement of it; therefore, it remains unchanged. In this respect, as in many others, men constitute an upper caste who have a monopoly on economic and

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political power and will use it only when it is directly in their interest. Females, on the other hand, although they would benefit from improvements in this area, are relatively powerless and so unable to implement the necessary changes. The failure of men to use their power to improve the situation of the houseworker is also due to the fact that they rightly feel that any major changes in this area would undermine male supremacy. Men now have their domestic work done for them free. If a change occurred in this area it might mean that men would have to share this now low-prestige work and/or pay to have someone else do it.

It has been suggested that women will gain equality only when they are all employed in the "public" labor force and that this step will by some magic free them from the status of unpaid domestic slavery. The solution to this dilemma can’t lie in the hope that all women will leave the home and join the outside paid labor force. First of all, women working outside the home receive the lowest wages and fill the lowest positions in the paid labor force. Secondly, even in time of economic expansion when new jobs are created, there aren’t enough jobs to go around.

Besides these two factors that deprive women of incentive to join the "outside" labor force, there are other deterrents. One of the main deterrents is the fact that there are no facilities set up by society for child care or home maintenance in the event that a woman decides to work outside the home. The few existing facilities can’t even be considered by the majority of women because of their prohibitive cost and their inability to accommodate more than a tiny percentage of those who might have use for them. Someone has to perform the vast amount of labor entailed in raising children and maintaining living quarters. This labor continues to devolve on women even when they have jobs outside the home. Doubly burdened, women are unable to devote their full attention to either job and are effectively kept at the lowest levels of the paid labor force. On top of that they have been used as scapegoats for every ill of society because they are unable to give their full attention to the roles of mother, wife, and housekeeper.

There are other equally discouraging deterrents of a psychological nature such as the belief that it is the duty of a woman to be solely a wife and mother and that she can’t overstep these limits except at the risk of losing her "true" identity. Also a woman’s edu-
cation isn’t geared to facilitate a successful or fulfilling career outside the home. Indoctrination and tracking take care of this. If in spite of this, a woman decides to work outside the home, it can be taken for granted that some of the psychological deterrents have been at least partially overcome. But having decided to work outside the home, she comes up against other obstacles that are impossible to remove by a mere change of thinking.

This brings us back to the problem of child care and housework. In other countries attempts have been made to improve the status of women and release them from their unpaid drudgery by drawing them into the paid labor force. These attempts failed and were doomed to failure from the outset because no adequate provisions were made for housework or the care of children. Because of the reformist nature of the changes in the role of women in these societies, the very basis of woman’s oppression remained untouched. Females didn’t actively share in the decision-making of these revolutions and in fact weren’t equally represented in any important areas of these revolutions.

I don’t think the feebleness of these reformist attempts is wholly attributable to innocent error or a faulty analysis on the part of male socialist planners but more likely to the unwillingness of males to share the responsibility for home maintenance and child care and an indifference on their part to something they think need not concern them. To equalize the status of the female would have entailed such major and drastic reorganization of society that, judging by the results of the revolutions, it was something the “revolutionary” leaders were unwilling or afraid to undertake. This attitude led them to attack only a symptom of the problem (i.e., the inequality of women in the paid labor force) rather than its root, woman’s primary oppression as unpaid domestic—the underlying reason for this inequality. The revolutionary goal of complete emancipation for the female half of the human race has in all revolutions been a goal of low priority which has later been neglected and finally betrayed. But this is an old story to the woman’s movement.

The reorganization of ordinary home maintenance service is long overdue. Household workers have, historically, been low paid, without standards of hours and working conditions, without collective bargaining, without most of the protections accorded by legislation and accepted as normal by other workers, and without
means and opportunity adequately to maintain their homes. (From *American Women (1963–1968): Report on the Status of Women*—Interdepartmental Committee)

This quote from *The Report on the Status of Women* gives an understated and inaccurate account of the situation of houseworkers: In fact it is meant only to apply to the tiny minority of houseworkers who actually do get paid! To say that a segment of the labor force is low-paid is quite different from stating that roughly half of the labor force is un-paid—the half that produces and maintains all labor power. Also the quote doesn’t recognize that this situation will exist by necessity under the present economy and a real change can be effected only along with a complete change in the sex role system. The situation of the paid houseworker is indelibly tainted by the economic status of the majority of unpaid houseworkers. How much remuneration is society willing to give for a service that is usually provided free?

In another pamphlet put out by the Woman’s Bureau of the US Department of Labor, this question is posed, “What is Equal Pay?” It goes on to explain that “Equal pay means payment of ‘rate for the job’ without regard to sex—in the factory, in the office, in the school, in the store—and in all other places where men and women perform work of a comparable character.”

In other pamphlets put out by the Department of Labor, it is cited that women on an average work anywhere between 36 and 99.6 hours a week in the home. This a job at which all women are employed at one time or another in their lives, if not all their lives. But there is no mention of “rate for the job” for this work, and this oversight holds true for socialist publications as well. The socialist analyses, including those by women, state that woman’s oppression arises at the point of production. What production? They mean, of course, the production that men are engaged in—the production of the “public” sector of the economy! The maddening persistence of this oversight lies in the male orientation of all this literature which does not recognize labor except “where men and women perform work of a comparable character.”

The phrase “comparable character” betrays the pseudo-equality offered by these analyses. The main function of woman, which she is confined to because of sex and which distinguishes her from the male, is just what is responsible for her inferior status in the outside labor force and everywhere. This function is in no way comparable
to anything done by males. To offer the illusion that women will be equal by receiving equal pay for work that is also done by males, is a conscious effort to keep women’s slavery intact. Women are not just laborers in the male-defined sense of the word. Women are the source of all labor in that they are the producers of all laborers. This is the basic means of production (reproduction) in any society. It creates the first commodity, female and male laborers, who in turn create all other commodities and products. Men as the ruling class profit from this commodity through its labor. These profits come in two sizes: king-size and super. The individual man who is king of his castle (the patrilineal family) has his labor power produced, prepared, and maintained for him free. When he sells his labor power on the market he is selling a commodity he owns but did not produce, thereby profiting from the slave labor that went into the making of this product. The male capitalist class makes a super-profit when it buys this labor power and then receives the surplus value of its “outside” economy production.

It is clear to me that women will not be freed from their sexual status (slavery) by being given equal opportunity in the “outside” labor force; it has been tried already and has failed. Rather they will be given the basis for equal opportunity by being freed of their function as domestic slaves and its form, the patrilineal family. If we attempt to improve the situation of the houseworker without attacking the economy and sex role attitudes which make this situation possible, then, in effect, we will be trying to make the slavery of women more palatable.

As it is not possible to make any improvements in the institution of slavery, and this is the only accurate counterpart we can find for housework, we must take housework out of the realm of slavery and thereby change its very nature and social meaning. This means, in effect, the abolition of “housework” and “domestic” service in the sense that it is now known. Once this work has to be paid for, it will be incorporated into the “public” economy. This means that the work that was formerly done in separate, duplicated, single units will be collectivized and industrialized on a large basis with a more efficient use of both time and labor and without the waste, alienation, and duplication now involved in child care and home maintenance. Only when this is accomplished will women be able to fight for their equality on a more nearly equal footing with men.