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MEAT MARKET

FEMALE FLESH
UNDER CAPITALISM

4 Dirty Work

The most elementary demand is not the right to work or receive equal pay for work, but the right to equal work itself

Juliet Mitchell

Marginalised bodies do marginalised work. Bodies that are arrogated and controlled can be persuaded to do work that is underpaid and overlooked. Slavemaking is a social science, and nowhere is that science more expertly demonstrated than in the continued ability of contemporary industrial culture to persuade women perform the vast majority of vital domestic and caring labour without expecting reward or payment.

After a century of feminism, women still do the lion's share of caring, cooking and cleaning duties, for free. Nowadays, we are also encouraged to do 'real' work – i.e., work traditionally done by men, outside the home – on top of these domestic duties, albeit for less pay and fewer rewards. In 2003, British women still performed an average of nineteen hours' worth of housework per week, compared with only five hours for men, whose share of the domestic burden has remained essentially unchanged since the early 1980s.¹⁷ Whilst unemployment and retirement decreased the number of hours spent by men on domestic work, they increased women's hours.

Women's work-relationship to their bodies mirrors our work-relationship to our homes: we labour at great personal cost to gild our cages, our increasing resentment tempered by fear of the social consequences of refusal. This fear is engendered in us by patriarchal capitalism, which would have everything to lose were women to once refuse to perform for free all the boring domestic work vital to support alienated industrial labour. We tidy away the messy reality of our bodies just as we tidy away the grim reality of domestic toil, because have been schooled to fear losing our womanhood, losing

our identity, if we refuse to shape up and clean house, no matter what our other engagements of paid work and social interaction may be. Modern women are told that we can have it all, which in practice means that *we must and should do it all – with a smile, and for free.*

There was once a dedicated movement, tied in to Marxist feminism, to change the labour conditions of working women across the world. This movement petered out in the 1980s, despite the fact that the labour dispute on the domestic front was never close to being won. Instead, men and women have retreated into a grim stalemate, and many find themselves standing on a picket line that extends across every home, from the sink to the washing machine to the kids' bedrooms. Before we set up homes together, we may not be aware that this picket line exists, but the strategic socio-sexual marginalisation of women's bodies makes it seem somehow natural and right that all the dirty, messy work of the home should be performed by women for low pay or no pay. Women are seen as animalistic, manipulable, and born to be low-paid workers; because we see ourselves in that way too, we capitulate – we abandon our resistance in effect, we scab.

Domestic drudgery is a capitalist construction

Whilst researching this chapter I interviewed Western women of all ages and classes who were balancing domestic labour with paid, 'real' work, and my overwhelming impression was one of defeatism and paralysis. Women, whether or not they identify as feminists, feel guilt about the state of our homes in the same way that we feel guilt about the state of our bodies – we feel ashamed of being seen to have somehow lost control, to be insufficiently worthy of our womanhood as socially interpreted. "Not being able to keep one's house clean still suggests complete breakdown," says Lucy, 38, a full-time mother. "Every time a stranger comes to my door I worry that

they are glancing past me at the grubby porch, and sofa covered in dog-fur and thinking, 'that woman has lost control of her life.' I feel like if my elderly neighbour looks in, she'll think I'm a failure as a woman." The feminization of domestic labour makes it seem at once trivial and an essential part of female identity. Housework and childcare are not real work, because women do them – and because they are done by women, whose bodies are marginalised to the point of unreality, they are not real work.

In fact, domestic labour is not at all trivial. Without the work that women do for free, every western economy would collapse within days. In the United States, the money that women should in theory be owed for their unpaid caring and domestic work runs to some six times the national defence budget, and the US defence budget is not small.

There is a word for what happens when you trap someone within the confines of a house and make them work for no reward for generations and tell them that they're good for nothing else. There's a word for what happens when generations of children of both sexes are raised in environments underpinned by resentment and the control dynamics essential to getting women's work done for nothing. There's a word for what happens when home and work in the home becomes indelibly associated with self-negation, abuse and stifled rage, and the word is trauma. The entirety of Western society is still traumatised by our complex relationship to the economics of domestic labour. No family truly escapes.

To understand why we are so dreadfully messed up when it comes to the entire sphere of life involving necessary care and self-care, it's vital to comprehend that we are living in a culture that has been traumatised – emotionally, physically, sexually and psychologically traumatised. At the 2009 Compass Conference women's seminar, speakers from the floor asked why housework is still so undervalued. It is undervalued because we have, slowly but surely, turned home itself into a locus of slavery, suffering and trauma. No wonder men are scared of scrubbing floors. Feminism

did not do this.

The c-word: rewriting history.

Capitalism is the essential context for understanding the marginalisation of women's bodies within the home. It was, after all, industrial capitalism which created and perpetuated the conditions for the degradation of housework and the degradation of women by association.

Historians such as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have described how separate spheres for men and women emerged between 1780 and 1850 as the workplace became separated from the home and a private, domestic sphere was created for women, formally and symbolically severing the processes of production and reproduction.¹⁸ The simple work of creating and sustaining life does not fit within the profit-oriented, pay-and-target driven capitalist imagining of society, but that work still had to be done, and it had to be done away from the factory floor, which after child labour laws came into force over the first half of the 19th century was officially declared no place for children. Thus, in 1737 over 98 per cent of married women in England worked outside the home, but by 1911 over 90 per cent were employed solely as housewives. Ivan Illich calls this process "the enclosure of women".¹⁹

The divorce of the domestic front from the public world of profit-oriented work and citizenship was reaffirmed by important new legal sanctions: married women were officially forbidden from owning property or making contracts, shutting them out from the world of business, and the 1832 Reform Bill made women's exclusion from political citizenship explicit for the first time, formally isolating women within the confines of the home.

In her editorial to *New Internationalist's* issue on the politics of housework, Debbie Taylor explains that "though domestic work has existed ever since there was a domus in which to do it, the housewife

role is a very recent one indeed – and confined to industrialized societies.”²⁰ As sociologist Anne Oakley put it, “other cultures may live in families but they do not necessarily have housewives. They have women, men and children whose labour is woven together like coloured thread in a tapestry, creating home, life and livelihood for the whole family.”²¹ As it became necessary for domestic work to be shoehorned cheaply into the profit-margins of industrial society, history was rapidly rewritten to ensure the acceptance of housework as woman’s divinely decreed role.

Just as this brutal domestic binary was made concrete, Darwin careered into the ideological landscape, crushing amongst other things the old Judeo-Christian excuses for female domesticity. A new logical basis for housework was needed, and fast. So the ‘hunter-gatherer’ mythos of human prehistoric development as extricated from the Christian imagining of history began to be phrased explicitly as dichotomy: male hunters versus female gatherers. Even the importance to some academic schools of the idea of human society as matriarchal and goddess-worshipping in the Paleolithic era has not diminished the notion that early female ‘gathering’ involved childcare, cooking, sewing and cleaning and, in the case of Wilma Flintstone, wearing stone-cut stilettos and brandishing a mini-mammoth vacuum cleaner: occupations that actually endorse not prehistoric but post-industrial norms of ‘feminine’ behaviour. The separation of the world of work into the superior productive and inferior reproductive, domestic sphere is not inherent to human organisation: it is a new thing. Over the course of centuries, the mechanisms of industrial capitalism and associated urbanisation have narrowed the concept of home to the confines of a house, creating in the process a system of battery pens for forced female labour. No wonder nobody wants to do the dishes any more.

Following the revolutionary feminism of the 1960s that began in the domestic prisons of the white middle-classes, the sheen has long since faded from the gilded cage of domesticity. Both men and women can now clearly see the trap into which ‘domestic’ labour

has been fashioned. But our response to this as decent, thinking beings has been woefully lacking. Feminism has achieved a vital expansion in women’s labour outside the home – but it has not won the corresponding, equally vital expansion of men’s labour within it. Feminism has amended the old patriarchal deal, but it has not ended it.

Mutually assured dysfunction

One of the most difficult things for feminists to acknowledge is the real harm done by women as well as by men in the domestic sphere. Partly as a consequence of hard-packed resentment at cultural isolation and forced drudgery, generations of women – mothers in particular – have handed down suffering, guilt and the expectation of patriarchal servitude to their children with a breathtaking ruthlessness borne of love and shame. Amanpreet Badyal, 21, told me how her childhood was blighted by her mother’s anguish:

My mother has tried repeatedly to break my spirit, claiming that she’s just preparing me for my mother-in-law. Alongside this, she harangued both my sisters to learn to cook; despite both successfully doing so, she subsequently tried to blame all marital problems, especially my eldest sister’s, on cooking. The thing is, my mum means well. She had seen what it is like for us Punjabi women, the sham of Sikh equality, and she wanted there to be no hope to so cruelly give way, treacherously feather-light, to betrayal and disappointment. I sincerely believed that I would never make it to 21, and that if I did, I would find myself in a marriage that would eventually drive me to suicide. How could I continue my mother’s cycle, and raise children that I resented? Why would I want to raise another child like myself, plagued by self-doubt and devoured by the family pack? I was hellishly afraid of this happening to me.

A blunt instrument for undermining gender activism and feminist solidarity is the claim that such assaults on human dignity are 'cultural', and therefore sacrosanct. In fact, not only is culture not a trump card in the progressive ideological battle, the isolation of women in the home and the traumatising of the domestic sphere are not unique to Sikh culture, or to 'Asian' culture, or to any culture not immediately comprehensible to middle-class white people. On the contrary, they are common throughout Western society, and have been a central narrative fact of the last 350 years of Western history.

Only saints react to imprisonment and abuse without retaliation, and women are not saints. The stereotype of the angel in the home was always a lie: for generations, and particularly since the post-war enforced domesticity of the 1950s, women have reacted to their domestic cages with a rage and resentment that has been at once effortlessly political and unguessably damaging. Given power in the domestic sphere and only there, limited, anxious matriarchies have developed across Western societies, and everyone understands what it means to have an Italian Mother, a Greek Mother, a Jewish Mother, or any other racist variation on the harridan hypothesis. The truth, however, is that the fury of female emotional control in the post-industrial home is the fury of the worker alienated from the means of production and reproduction, a fury deliberately weighted against the cruelty of male political and economic dominance in public society. Thus it is that 21st-century capitalism maintains a structure of gendered labour in which everyone, male or female, is to some extent powerless and to some extent miserable.

It is this dichotomy of dysfunction which is truly challenged by gay and single-parent families. When conservative pundits tell us that lone and homosexual parents represent a threat to 'family values', they are articulating this basic fear – that the structures of mutual repression will be broken by people brave enough to create and live in homes which challenge the culture and economics of that system.

I am the child and grandchild of housewives who hated housework. My grandmother, who as I write this chapter is in the latter stages of terminal cancer, did her duty as an immigrant Catholic homemaker, raising six children in a tiny council house in Bristol. A bright and beautiful woman who loved learning, Marta Penny ought to have gone to university, but her infant ambition was quickly crushed by the commandment to wield socio-economic power only and forever in the fantasy Catholic home. The frustrations of received femininity have defined my grandmother: her entire life has been undercut by misery, resentment and passive-aggression, instilled into her from her childhood in Malta, where her own mother made her scrub the floors daily with an old toothbrush to get her 'used' to drudgery.

Her youngest daughter, my mother, is a brilliant defence lawyer who put her career on hold to take care of my sisters and myself, having given up on getting my father to do his share. Raised with the belief that women deserved to be educated and to earn money, she was shocked to find herself facing the same frustrations that plagued her mother; frustrations which were lessened only after her divorce.

Beyond the gilded cage

In one way or another, the domestic deal makes cowards of us all. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* lit the fuse which blew the cage door open in the 1960s and 1970s, but we have failed, like tame animals, to step very far across the threshold of that cage. Our labour battles are tentative, and we are slow to apprehend our own bargaining power.

I asked hundreds of women, married and single, living with their partners and living with housemates, in Europe and North America and Australia, about how they organised their domestic labour and whether their partners shared the load. Hundreds of times over, the answer was almost identical: "He just can't cope with the dishes";

"He doesn't understand how to sort laundry no matter how many times I explain it"; "He says he can't do it, which is his way of saying that he won't do it". Most of all: "He says he can't see the dirt I see". One woman cried as she told me how she and her disabled mother had no choice but to cook, clean and care for a recalcitrant alcoholic father and two brothers, on top of being a single mother and student herself. "It actually is a war," she said.

Anyone who has ever been seven years old knows when "can't" really means "won't". What at first seemed to be individual grudges amongst the women and girls I interviewed turned out to be a universal complaint: even though they know perfectly well that there is no logical reason for them to be exempt from the sponge and the lloo brush, all that men and boys have to do to avoid chores is dig in their heels and refuse to acknowledge the dirt; sit and moulder in their own accumulating grime; wait out the filth. Eventually, a nearby female will reluctantly roll up her dainty sleeves and wipe up the mess.

It is not so much that men have a higher tolerance for dirt – on the contrary, recent studies have shown that roughly the same percentage of adult men and women care "a lot or quite a lot" about standards of hygiene and domestic comfort. Rather, domestic equality stumbles against the fact that men, as members of the domestic bourgeois, have so much more to lose as individuals and as a privileged group by facing up to the base cowardice of that 'can't'. What we are facing here is not series of separate household slanging matches but a systemic offensive against women's rights as workers.

My generation, born after the supposed victory of feminism, grew up with that labour dispute on our doorsteps, our infant identities held hostage in the subtle violence of domestic negotiations. Kathryn, 35, from Winnipeg, Canada, is just one of the growing army of women who will do anything not to have to bear the pain and frustration that our mothers faced:

My mother seemed to be tired and stressed out pretty much all

the time. I don't remember her being happy often. I honestly think that by the end of the day, she had nothing left to give us, emotionally speaking – she was worn out, and even the fact that she was out there earning a paycheque had no appreciable impact on her total responsibility on the domestic front. Watching my mother become a tired automaton had a huge impact on my life. I vowed never to end up with a man who didn't do his share. I failed at that the first time, and I ended up hiring a cleaner to save my marriage. I couldn't stand that he wilfully ignored dirt, and I couldn't stand things only got done if I had a meltdown. I feel very strongly that my girls should see me smile and laugh as often as possible. I give them a lot of physical affection and tell them I love them every day, because I don't want them to feel the lack I did.

Big babies

There are, of course, some occasions when 'can't' really does mean 'can't'. And this should give us pause for thought. Why, in a culture which has had universal electrical provision for barely seventy years, do so many men lack the basic practical skills to prevent themselves and their loved ones starving, freezing, sickening, burning or choking to death in their own homes?

Like any bourgeois class, men have been kept ignorant and dependent on a class of labourers with subordinated bodies, and encouraged to see that ignorance and that dependence as empowerment. Boys in the post-war era in particular have been denied even the basic tools of housekeeping, and three generations of young men have now grown up watching their fathers do next to nothing in the home, apart from the sanctioned male activities of lawn maintenance and garden barbecue operation. Keeping men dependent on women to take care of them reinforces the double-headed axe of domestic disenfranchisement, ensuring that post-

industrial capitalist homemaking is seen as the only viable option for people who want to live comfortable lives and raise healthy families.

The genius of this strategy has been to persuade men that their learned incompetence in the home is strength, when in fact it is weakness – terrible weakness. That weakness places immeasurable restrictions on the choices of men and boys both within and outside the home.

The deliberate domestic disempowerment of men did not begin with no-fault divorce laws. On the contrary – the empowerment which men really have lost in the home is not about dominance, but about self-sufficiency: not a man's right to sit at the head of the table or to have 'access' to 'his' children, but the power to cook a meal that feeds a family or to keep himself and his loved ones from squalor and sickness. For many years, men and boys have been deliberately deprived of these skills, and adult men and women have colluded in that deprivation, which is two-horned in its faulty logic: not only are domestic work, childcare and homemaking beneath the dignity of men, but men themselves are apparently congenitally incapable of performing these tasks. How many times have you heard a home-based woman say, her resentment tinged with a hint of pride, that her husband just can't take care of himself – or, if he sometimes deigns to do the dishes, that he's 'well trained'? How many times have you heard a man refer to taking care of his own children as 'babysitting'?

Just as the lie of male domestic disempowerment flatters men that they are more suited to directly profit-producing work, it flatters women that housework is somehow their special inheritance, that their men are in some way genetically inferior, categorically incapable of taking proper care of themselves or anyone else.

Meanwhile, the most brain-bleedingly pointless domestic tasks have, for some young women today, become so alien and fantastic that they are now a lifestyle option. Cookery classes and knitting circles encourage young, trendy western women to indulge in

a sanctioned fantasy of glamorous domesticity that never really existed, an arched, kinky fetishism of the trappings of a drudgery that is still the reality of many women's lives. I know plenty of young women my age, educated and emancipated, who view the baking of immaculate muffins and the embroidering of intricate scarves and mittens as exciting hobbies, pastimes which should be properly performed in high-waisted fifties skirts and silly little pinafores. Oddly enough, most of these women have no more of a clue how to iron the pleats into a pair of dress trousers than I do. Such hedonistic time-wastage has all the historical accuracy of the sort of sexual role-play which involves Victorian schoolboy outfits and birch whipping canes, and like all such power-play, the practice is perfectly jolly fun as long as it isn't taken seriously. Unexamined, there is always the risk that a fetish will bleed into reality.

Working 9 to 5

In industrial capitalist society, waged work is the only strategy for being acknowledged and acknowledging yourself as fully human. As such, the struggles of women for equal pay and equal opportunities in the job market and the struggles of women to be recognised as human beings in their own right have been seen by many both within and outside the feminist movement as one and the same. In fact, they are nothing of the kind. Women are people whether we are waged or unwaged, working full time as business leaders or as mothers, whether we support ourselves financially, are supported by family members, or receive state benefits; all women are people, just as all people are people. Similarly, the right to equal pay for equal work, still a hurdle Western women have yet to surmount, is a struggle that is important on its own merits, because it is about basic fairness, not because waged work is what validates our very existence. We deserve equal pay because it is our right as workers: we do not require it to justify our humanity.

At some point during the 1990s, the international Wages For Housework campaign, once a key part of the feminist agenda, dragged itself into a corner and quietly died. The campaign, stolidly opposed even by right-thinking hand-wringing liberals in its day, is now universally acknowledged as preposterously unrealistic – not because it isn't women's moral right to receive rewards for their labour above and beyond the satisfaction of a job well done, but because no modern government can afford to pay its women for the lifetimes of work they do for free.

Passing the buck

Sadly, the trench warfare that currently has men terrified into refusing housework and women longing to rid themselves of it is pernicious enough that very many women would rather be complicit in the exploitation of other, poorer women than confront their own partners. The questions that Jane Story posed when writing for *New Internationalist* in 1988 are still hanging: "It appears that women professionals – feminist and non-feminist alike – have solved their personal housework crisis in the easiest way possible. They've simply bought their way out of the problem. Instead of being exploited themselves, they shift the exploitation to another woman. But not everyone can pass the buck in this way. Who cleans the cleaner's house?"²²

Of the women I spoke to who had found a workable solution to the sharing of domestic work in their households, 90% employed some sort of home help, from a weekly cleaner to a live-in au pair. Many more expressed a hope that they would one day be able to afford similar domestic help. Rich households have always had servants, but the anxiety and reach of contemporary Western women's employment of cleaners and carers to relieve them of the double shift of housework and paid work is unprecedented. This strategy is not without its drawbacks. Hardly any of the women

questioned were entirely comfortable with the situation, as well they might not be: nearly all cleaners, childminders and nannies are female, and a large proportion are foreign-born, either legal or illegal migrants. Western women's despair at the very point of asking our male relatives to do their bit, our unwillingness to challenge the system at its root, is such that an entire generation has been willing to simply hand down their oppression to poor, migrant and ethnic minority women.

Whilst most domestics are paid, albeit poorly, a proportion are illegal immigrants controlled by gangs, and some are victims of human trafficking. Although due to the nature of international operations accurate estimates are still impossible, it is believed that fully twelve percent of the 27 million victims of human trafficking worldwide – 700,000 in the United States alone – are indentured domestic slaves. A further 36% are delicately described as 'miscellaneous' or 'other' workers, meaning in plain English that some sex slaves are also expected to wash the sheets afterwards.

It would be soothing to think that the wealthy men and women employing these unfortunate women are largely ignorant of their plight, but this is not the case. In Westernised areas of the Middle East such as Dubai, the burning of domestics' passports is routine – and illegal residence in the country is punishable by death. In 2007, a wealthy couple from Muttontown, New York, were convicted of enslaving and torturing two Indonesian women who were brought to their mansion to work as housekeepers, and similar cases have come to light across the United States since federal anti-trafficking laws were brought into force in the year 2000. Across the world, disgusting damage is inflicted by our unwillingness to confront our terror of gender-specified drudgery.

Judith Ramirez, co-ordinator of the Toronto-based International Coalition to End Domestics' Exploitation (INTERCEDE) insists that there is no simple solution to what she calls "a modern day variation on the slave trade" – hiring a nanny or a housekeeper is

really a question of women trying to fend for themselves. "I don't see any other way when there are so few day-care places for young children. We're nowhere near a universal day-care system accessible to everyone. As long as that's the case, there are going to be a lot of women hired as domestics."

Men and women have been passing the buck for too long. We need to confront our own hypocrisy and find equitable, less exploitative solutions to the dichotomy of domestic dysfunction, before more harm is done.

Marginalised bodies, marginalised work

Every nation relies for its very survival on its female citizens failing, day after day, year after year, generation after generation, to refuse to drudge for no reward. This should, in theory, give women great power, simply by the threat of refusing, one day, to serve.

Female power of refusal is the single most scary, most horrifying, most insistently phobic thing facing any society, ever. Women could, in theory, refuse to cook and clean and care and keep society running. Women could refuse to fit themselves out in conformity with the patriarchal proclivity not just for staid, acceptable sex, but for social order. Women could refuse that vital work, the bearing of children and the raising of future generations, all of which are keyed in to the domestic gender war. Simply by doing nothing at all, women could bring every Western society to its knees tomorrow. That single fact is intolerably terrifying: women must be stopped at all costs from having that basic human right, the right to say no, the right to lay down our tools and pull on our skirts and say, stop. No more. I will not serve.

The very easiest way to deny someone the basic human right of refusal is to deny their personhood and potential. And the easiest way to deny someone their personhood and potential, in contemporary society as in any ancient slaveowning culture, is not

to pay them.

We could refuse to serve, of course. But anyone who has internalised even a solitary crumb of the post-industrial gender fetish knows that a woman's power of refusal is circumscribed on every level. In the flesh trade of modern production, women's labour hours, like our bodies, are common property. We all know that when a woman says no, she really means yes.