Symposium on Wages for Housework

Date: March 4-6, 2021

Organised by

Laws of Social Reproduction Project, Dickson Poon School of Law, King's College London
Initiative for What Works to Advance Women and Girls in the Economy (IWWAGE) &
FESDIG (Feminist Economics Saturday Discussion Group), New Delhi

Anti Price-Rise Demonstration Gujarat, 1973 (Radha Kumar The History of Doing, 1993)

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Women in India spend up to 352 minutes per day on domestic work which is 577 per cent more than men (52 minutes) and at least 40 per cent more than the women in China (234 minutes) and South Africa (250 minutes) (OECD, 2017). Time-use data from 2019 gathered by the National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO) revealed that more than 80 per cent of women and girls above 6 years engaged in unpaid domestic work, compared to over a quarter of men. Unpaid domestic and care work (UDCW) is thus highly gendered and highly unequally distributed in India. A striking election promise by Makkal Needhi Maiam, a new political party in Tamil Nadu to pay housewives a monthly wage, has sparked a national debate over salaries for housewives. The party has pledged to recognise housework as a salaried profession by paying homemakers for their work at home which has been 'hitherto unrecognized and unmonetized'. The prospect of wages for housework (WFH) calls for deeper engagement, discussion and debate given its chequered significance in the history of feminist movements, its potential in the Indian context and its implications for changes in policy and law reform. The symposium will revisit feminist debates on unpaid work through the lens of wages for housework, the implications of such UDCW for women's inequality, the challenges of measuring UDCW and the appropriate policy and regulatory solutions for recognising and redistributing UDCW.

Thursday March 4, 2021

SESSION 1 **HERSTORIES OF WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK**

(TIME: 9:00 – 11am GMT; 2:30 – 4:30 pm IST)

Chair & Moderator: Samita Sen, University of Cambridge

Speakers: Devaki Jain, Feminist Scholar and Activist
Rohini Hensman, Feminist Scholar and Activist
K. Lalita, Anveshi Research Centre for Women's Studies, Hyderabad
Samita Sen, University of Cambridge

The international wages for housework campaign can be traced back to the 1970s. Selma James first put forward the idea of wages for housework in March 1972 at the National Conference of Women in Manchester in a paper called *Women, the Unions and Work, or … What Is Not to Be Done*. James and Italian feminist Mariarosa Dalla Costa wrote the popular essay *Women and the Subversion of the Community* in 1972. James then went on to form the Power of Women Collective which soon became the Wages for Housework Committee. Dalla Costa, James and Silvia Federici were part of the International Feminist Collective which began the Wages for Housework campaign in Italy and the U.K. Federici, with her collaborator, Nicole Cox, founded the first United States chapter of Wages for Housework in New York in 1974 with James's guidance. But there was a split on race between the New York WFH Committee and the Black Women for Wages for Housework (BWWFH), formed in 1975, which organised with black welfare mothers in New York.

The WFH campaign highlighted the role of women's unwaged labour in the home and its connection to the production of surplus value under capitalism. Alongside other demands like the right to have or not to have children, wages for housework campaigners made visible the political implications of women's everyday experience of housework and caring for children and others in the 'private' realm of the household. Some activists claimed that the demand for wages for housework was a political perspective and a revolutionary strategy more than a demand for salaries for housewives. Other activists viewed wages for housework not only as a demand for state payment for housewives, but as a political perspective which redefined the working class internationally as including the unwaged and low waged, men as well as women, in the home and on the land. The movement has over the decades, pushed the debates in social reproduction towards demands for the right to land ownership, decent and affordable housing, leisure time, green spaces, accessible childcare centres, and related infrastructure services (e.g. access to renewable energy and piped water) likely to reduce time spent on housework. On March 8, 2000, the International Wages for Housework Campaign called for a Global Women's Strike (GWS) demanding among other things, "payment for all caring work – in wages, pensions, land and other resources." In 2020, the GWS network and IWFHC joined a coalition of organizations including the Green New Deal for Europe (GNDE) with a policy recommendation to "fund a care income to compensate unpaid activities like care for people, the urban and rural environment, and the natural world."

In India meanwhile, as early as the 1980s, the Shramshakthi Report observed that "among the poor, all women work", cautioning against the narrow definitions of "work" in the labour surveys which excluded women's unpaid "productive" work such as free collection of goods, vegetables, firewood, and cattle feed; sewing; tailoring; weaving for household use; fetching water; tending poultry; and maintaining kitchen gardens. Groups like the Progressive Organisation of Women called for women's economic independence through paid work and the socialisation of UDCW through "cheap and efficient restaurants, creches, child-care centres and laundries." In 2012, the Ministry of Women and Child Development considered a proposal which would make it mandatory for husbands to share a certain percentage of their income with their wives who stay at home and carry out domestic work. However, the proposal did not materialise. In 2013, the Goa state government introduced the Griha Aadhar Scheme, a monthly housewife allowance, under which every eligible housewife from poor families with an annual income of less than Rs 3 lakhs is entitled to receive Rs 1,500 a month.

The session aims to analyse how the question of UDCW was posed in the context of the IWFHC, how this movement has transformed into the Global Women's Strike internationally in the past twenty years and how feminists in India have theorised women's unpaid work while drawing from similar materialist feminist traditions.

SESSION 2 **RECONCEPTUALISING AND MEASURING UNPAID WORK: THE INDIAN EXPERIENCE**

(TIME: 11.15 – 1:15P.M. GMT; 4:45 – 6:45 pm IST)

Chair & Moderator: Soumya Kapoor-Mehta, IWWAGE

Speakers: Neetha N, Centre for Women's Development Studies
Jeemol Unni, Ahmedabad University
Ellina Samantroy Jena, V.V. Giri National Labour Institute

India has one of lowest levels of female labour force participation (FLFP) in the world, with a steadily declining FLFP rate which has reached a historic low of 20.8 per cent. This means that over three out of four working age women remain out of the workforce and report being primarily engaged in domestic duties. The paradox of declining FLFP has puzzled many and heightened the urgency to address the issue. Explanations include an income effect and increased educational opportunities for women. Some feminist economists have attributed these trends to the lack of decent work for women and to a crisis of social reproduction. A third explanation offered is poor measurement of women's work.

One of the distinctive features of Indian feminist interventions has been to offer an expansive understanding of women's unpaid work going beyond UDCW to encompass unpaid subsistence work and unpaid family labour. The impetus came from the urge to redraw the production boundary to recognise and account for the work women do in agricultural economies. The UN System of National Accounts eventually recognised this. However, the official statistics in India, the labour force estimates of the NSSO and the population census do not account for the unpaid work of women in the processing of subsistence goods, collection of free goods and as family farm labour. Undercounting of women's work due to employment surveys' conventional understanding of work and other measurement issues (including enumerator understanding and training) have led to an assessment of declining rates of female labour force participation rates over the last few decades.

This session will discuss how feminist economists have conceptualised women's UDCW in India and how they have proposed and fine-tuned methods to account for it.

Friday March 5, 2021

SESSION 3 LEGAL IMPLICATIONS OF WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

(TIME: 9-11.30am GMT 2.30-5 pm IST)

Chair & Moderator: Prabha Kotiswaran, King's College London

Speakers: Faizan Mustafa, NALSAR University of Law
Veena Gowda, Advocate
Saptarshi Mandal, Jindal Global Law School
Grashious Kuriakose, Senior Advocate
Bina Agarwal, University of Manchester

India has a high rate of marriage and one of the lowest divorce rates in the world (2.6%). Therefore, family is a key site at which women's UDCW is performed and consumed. Family law then becomes a crucial site for seeking the recognition of housewives' labour. One way to compensate women's unpaid work is to ensure the equitable division of property at divorce through a community property regime or a pre-nuptial agreement. However, this means that women's unpaid work is unlikely to be recognised unless there is a breakdown of marriage. What then are the mechanisms through which housewives can have a claim over marital property during the life of the marriage? If wages for housework materialise, what are the implications for the distribution of marital property? What effect does this have on the regulation of dowry and age of marriage? On property law? Can developments in other fields such as tort law wherein a "robust wages for housework jurisprudence" has developed be used to quantify women's UDCW? What are the possibilities for constitutionalising the recognition of UDCW? The session aims to examine how law and policy can recognise women's unpaid work within marriage whether upon divorce or before and the inter and intra gender distributive outcomes that will result from such changes.

SESSION 4 POLICY IMPLICATIONS OF WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK

(TIME: 11.45am-1.15pm GMT 5.15-6.45 pm IST)

Chair & Moderator: Prabha Kotiswaran, King's College London

Speakers: Deepta Chopra, Institute of Development Studies
Dipa Sinha, Ambedkar University Delhi

The role of the state is crucial in provisioning for facilities that enable social reproduction (of which UDCW is a part). We have the Indian state's landmark initiatives like the Integrated Child Development Services (ICDS) scheme, one of the world's largest community-based child

care programme, the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, 2006 which guarantees 100 days of paid work for the rural poor, the National Health Mission carried out through grassroot level female ASHA workers (or accredited social health activists), mobile creches for migrant workers and the National Food Security Act, 2013. Grassroots feminist mobilization for legal and policy reform have traditionally focused on child-care, maternity and health rights. Only recently have the national campaigns on the right to social security and food expanded their constituency to include women performing UDCW. Further, state macroeconomic policies which cut back on the provision of public services and basic infrastructure create new constraints on women's work and time capacities, increasing their burden of unpaid labour. Feminist economists including in India have advocated for gender budgeting as a feminist policy tool for reorienting the allocation of public resources and securing equity in the distribution of resources between men and women. It is against this backdrop that this session will map the care infrastructure of the Indian state and ask what wages for housework might mean for welfare schemes currently in place.

Saturday March 6, 2021

SESSION 5 **DEBATE FOR AND AGAINST WAGES FOR HOUSEWORK**

(TIME: 9-11 am GMT; 14.30-16.30 IST)

JOIN SESSION HERE

Chair and Moderator Bina Agarwal, University of Manchester

Speakers: Selma James, International Wages for Housework Campaign
Prabha Kotiswaran, King's College London
Soumya Kapoor Mehta, IWWAGE
Ritu Dewan, Feminist Scholar

The idea of a wages for housework movement and a salary for housewives has sparked much interest and debate in the Indian context. The prospect of a salary for housework has found support amongst many who consider women's unpaid domestic and care labour as work and believe that recognising and paying for such work in the home would empower women. The counter argument is that one cannot put a price tag on what is done out of love by mothers and wives and cannot be equated with waged work. Further, paying women for their work as housewives will institutionalise the patriarchal notion of women as 'carers' and men as 'providers'. There are also concerns that a demand for payment to housewives will take the debate away from where its focus should be i.e. better measurement of women's unpaid work so it gets counted in labour statistics; improved access to infrastructure such as piped water, clean energy and transportation which would allow women to access opportunities; and provision of universal, quality child care centers which would free women from the burden of care.

Irrespective of which side of the debate one is on, there seems to be a consensus that women's UDCW is proving to be an obstacle to women's paid labour for the market. Hence,

the Sustainable Development Goals (target 5.4) call for recognizing and valuing UDCW through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as is nationally appropriate

In case wages were to be paid to women for housework to enhance their bargaining power within a patriarchal household and have positive ripple effects on women's paid work (often seen as an extension of their housework and care work), there are other unresolved and debatable issues. For example, who should pay for such work? How should UDCW be valued? Should women be paid a care income? Should the payment be conditional or unconditional, targeted or universal, gendered or gender neutral, short-term or long-term? How would it be financed? How would it be delivered?

Finally, whether salaries for housework materialise or not, political demands for the recognition of UDCW can lead to the mobilisation of tens of millions of Indian housewives. For example, there have been dispersed attempts to collectivise Indian housewives to seek recognition for their unwaged labour as work. A group of women in northern Wayanad, Kerala formed a collective in 2009 to demand wages for women's unpaid domestic work and petitioned the Kerala high court which was rejected. Similarly, an application by the National Housewives Association, seeking recognition as a trade union in 2010, was rejected by the deputy registrar of trade unions on the ground that housework is not a trade or an industry. This session will discuss implications of wages for housework for the collective mobilisation of Indian housewives.

This workshop is part of project entitled The Laws of Social Reproduction, which seeks to study women's reproductive labour in five sectors bridging the marriage-market continuum: sex work, bar dancing, commercial surrogacy, paid domestic work and unpaid domestic work. The project is headed by Professor Prabha Kotiswaran at King's College London, with the support of postdoctoral researchers Dr. Sutapa Majumdar, Dr. Sophy K.J., Dr. Shakthi Nataraj and Dr. Sreerupa. The project is generously supported by the European Research Council.