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Part VI

Society
14. Individuals and families
14.1

The centrality of the household to the modern world-system

Wilma A. Dunaway

World-systems foundational thinkers emphasized the centrality of sexism, women’s work, and households to modern capitalism. Soon after the publication of Wallerstein’s (1974) groundbreaking book that signaled the emergence of this new paradigm, the Fernand Braudel Center at Binghamton University structured ongoing research teams (Research Working Group 1978) that emphasized women’s unpaid labor as a subsidy to capitalism. Under the tutelage of Immanuel Wallerstein (1981, 1998) and Terence Hopkins (1985; Hopkins and Wallerstein 1982), a team of faculty and graduate students conceptualized the household as the smallest organizational unit of the modern world-system (Wallerstein and Martin 1979). Their theoretical formulations integrated ground-breaking ideas about unpaid household labor that were formulated by radical feminists at Germany’s University of Bielefeld (von Verhlof 1985), as well as emerging work about the informal sector (Portes 1983). This early conceptual work was published in issues of the Braudel Center journal (Review 1979, 1980, 1981, 1982, 1983, 1985, 1986, now available through JSTOR library database), in Wallerstein (1983), and in Smith et al (1984, 1992). While my own accumulated work is informed by this foundational work, I have revised and extended it in several ways.

The nexus of unpaid and paid labors

There is widespread consensus among international development agencies (United Nations 1999), among radical feminists (Mies 1986; von Verhlof 1983), and among world-system analysts that the vast majority of the world’s workers have never been fully proletarianized. The “partiality of wage labor” is an historical hallmark of the modern world-system, and most of the world’s households have never been dependent solely on the accumulation of resources and income through the wage mechanism (Wallerstein 1995: 1). Indeed, capitalists have always exploited semi-subsistence producers “who are available as cheap laborers” (von Verhlof 1983: 338) because their households reproduce and provision the labor force through nonwaged livelihoods and resources (Smith and Wallerstein 1992). Rather than being relics from precapitalism, these nonwaged labor forms “are the product of constraints specific to the capitalist world-economy,” and they are “no less ‘capitalist’ than the labor in the most advanced robotized plant” (von Verhlof 1983: 321). However, these workers “are only marginally or partially proletarianized as, over their life cycle, they derive the bulk of the means of subsistence … from outside the wage economy” (Arrighi and Saul 1968: 149). Because complete proletarianization is too costly for capitalists, new
processes of nonwaged labor have been created far more rapidly than workers have been integrated into waged labor (Tabak and Crichlow 2000).

At the same time that capitalism tends toward proletarianization, the system offsets that creation of waged laborers through the process of housewifization. Even though household labor is a structural necessity of capitalism, capitalists obscure the economic value of these contributions to capital accumulation (von Verhlof 1983). “The extremely different conditions of work of the free wage laborer and the housewife constitute the two poles of a continuum of capitalist conditions of work relations and of production.” Therefore, the parasitic relationship between wage labor and housewife production constitutes “the basis of all capitalist relations of production” (Smith et al 1984: 149, 266). The housewife did not exist in her present form prior to capitalism because precapitalist peoples were tied to larger communities that pooled survival and reproduction resources. When an area is incorporated into the world-system, capitalists effect policies that lead to the elimination of such alternative livelihood arrangements (Dunaway 2011; Smith and Wallerstein 1992). “The integration of women … into a world-system of capital accumulation has not and will not transform them into free wage-labourers. It is precisely this fact—their not being free wage-labourers, but housewives—which makes capital accumulation possible” (Mies 1981: 500).

Historically, proletarianization has integrated only a small percentage of the world’s population (ILO 2007). Consequently, the typical capitalist worker has been “the marginalized, housewifized, unfree labourer, most of them women” (Mies 1986: 116). By externalizing the maintenance and reproduction of households outside the range of capitalist costs of production, housewifization justifies low wages and renders economically invisible a large portion of world labor. Whether for consumption or market, women’s labors can “be bought at a much cheaper price” because they lie outside formal capitalist waged sectors (Mies 1986: 116) and because they are socially viewed as “household provisioning” without economic value (Dunaway 2012). On the one hand, housewifization has been a functional requirement of capitalism to such an extent that household-based work—not wage labor—has been predominant in the modern world-system. On the other hand, women’s labors comprise “the great ‘Other’ of the market” because capitalism lays a “veil of invisibility” over their household-based work (Blumberg 1979: 448). Indeed, “the secret of all capitalist life” is that unwaged labor supplies much of the surplus that capitalists accumulate (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa 1999: 154).

How do capitalists extract surplus from households?

I am challenging the western feminist claim (e.g., Matthaei 1982) that the household and the capitalist enterprise are separate spheres. In that dichotomization, the household is designated as the unpaid female sphere of domestic activity while paid work is externalized into the male-dominated capitalist realm. Woman’s work in the home is described as “a premarket form of labor” in which the household never engages in income-earning activities that are traded publicly. This conceptualization ignores all the income-earning work that is done by women in households. Because of the parasitic nexus between waged labor and housewifization, the vast majority of the world’s workers are marginalized into semiproletarian households from which capitalists can more easily drain hidden surpluses (Wallerstein 1995). In reality, the semiproletarian household is a locus of production in which members simultaneously produce use-value and exchange-value (Dunaway 2012; Smith et al 1984: 131–45). In addition to reproduction, maintenance, and socialization of the labor force (Mies 1986), households serve another essential function for capitalism. They represent millions of structural units that enable capitalists to conceal their systematic extraction of surpluses from workers and from women. Because capitalists extract
surpluses from households, consumers never pay the full cost of any commodity. If capitalists compensated households for all their hidden subsidies, externalized costs, and unpaid labor, prices would be driven so high that most commodities would not be competitive in the world-economy. At the macrostructural level, the commodity chain is the global mechanism through which surpluses are extracted from households. A commodity chain is more than a long string of spatial points at which mechanical processes occur to generate a marketable product. Because it consists of successive layers of unequal exchanges, a commodity chain is an interconnected network of nodes at which capitalists directly and indirectly extract surpluses from households. Indeed, every exchange within a commodity chain is unequal, for there is a polarized distribution of the means of production (including natural resources) not only between nodes but also within every single node. Consequently, a commodity chain structures multiple opportunities for capitalists to extract surpluses from households (Dunaway 2001, 2011, 2012).

The first level of hidden inputs into commodity chains occurs through women’s biological ability to reproduce and to sustain new laborers. Only that which has value in the marketplace was assigned to the formal economy while the work necessary to produce and maintain households was redefined to be “non-work.” Labor that earned money in the capitalist workplace or marketplace came to be defined as “productive.” Concomitantly, labor inside the household was devalued with the myth that it generated no surplus that could be appropriated (Mies 1986). “It is the wage form,” contends Seccombe (1974: 29), “that obscures domestic labour’s relation to capital.” Even though it is not priced in the marketplace, housework has economic value, and its unwaged character makes it highly profitable. The housewife’s unpaid work is “embodied in the waged labor, and it is a direct input into production. It is not necessary for the housewife to sell her labor to the capitalist for her labor to generate economic surpluses. Traded first to the husband for partial subsistence, it then existed in the husband’s labor as an element of subsistence made available to capital for free” (Boydston 1986: 21–22). For this reason, non-proletarianized labor is essential to capitalism, for the highest profits result when nonwaged forms of labor subsidize the capitalist production process. In semiproletarian households, wages “can be reduced below the level of household reproduction because the household supplements this income with its other income-generating activities” (Wallerstein 1995: 5–6).

The second level of hidden subsidies occurs through unpaid household labor that is contributed to home-based capitalist commodity production. Because of their combined subsidization of capitalism through unpaid reproductive and/or market-oriented labors, households have been the “pillar of accumulation” throughout the history of the world-system (Smith et al 1984: 131–45). For instance, a majority of unpaid workers in family-based enterprises or farms are females (United Nations 2003). Wives and children are expected to contribute labor as assistants to the market-oriented production of the husband, but that “family labor” is neither valued economically nor acknowledged socially (Boydston 1986: 9). Capitalists do not only extract surpluses through unpaid household labor, for paid work that is household-based is also devalued and rendered invisible. Thus, the third level of hidden subsidies occurs when households and women are under-paid for their nonwaged inputs into a capitalist production process. Routinely, peripheral households generate market commodities or informal sector inputs into the export production process, but these labors are priced at below-market levels (Mies 1981). In agricultural households, women’s livelihoods are often publicly devalued and stigmatized, even when they are as economically valuable as male-dominated export crops (Dunaway 2008, 2011). A narrow emphasis upon those waged and nonwaged laborers who are involved directly in commodity production can ignore three types of hidden laborer inputs. There can be direct and indirect flows into the production process from household provision pools, from the informal economy, and from illegal sectors (Dunaway 2011, 2012). The informal sector provides cheaper goods to workers, permitting...
capitalists to pay lower wages. Moreover, capitalists routinely lower production costs by integrating informal goods and services into their commodity chains (Tabak and Crichlow 2000). Nonwaged household workers supply foodstuffs, raw materials, and other inputs that provision the capitalist production process (Dunaway 2008, 2011). Moreover, women and children receive below-market prices for household-based inputs into commodity chains, including the collection of ecological resources and the retrieval of recyclable garbage (Tabak and Crichlow 2000; United Nations 2003).

The fourth level of hidden subsidies occurs when workers engage in home-based production of goods and services that are integrated into commodity chains. Such putting out systems and cottage industries (termed *casualization* since the 1990s) have been an enduring feature of capitalism since the sixteenth century (Littlefield and Reynolds 1990), and workers in these production systems have always been disproportionately female (Tabak and Crichlow 2000). In the Global South, emerging industries integrate nonwaged workers directly into their commodity chains through employment of home-based contract workers who simultaneously subsidize capitalists through their unpaid household inputs and their under-paid outputs (Beneria and Roldan 1987). For example, many contemporary Asian women “have been housewifized” to subsidize textile commodity chains through their integration into low-paying piece-rate contracts (Mies 1986). Through these exploitative mechanisms, capitalists externalize much of the cost of production to households by paying a level of remuneration that falls far below the wages paid to factory workers. In addition, households assume the costs for provisioning workers, for the integration of unpaid children, for equipment, for electricity and support goods and services. Moreover, these households are legally accountable for any ecological damage caused by the production process. Despite the significance of their labor inputs into commodity chains, homeworkers are rendered economically invisible because they are neither counted in national statistics nor as part of the waged labor force (Waring 1988).

The fifth level of hidden subsidies occurs because capitalist commodity chains structure networks in which consumer and laborer households at higher nodes benefit from the exploitation of households at lower nodes. Through the commodity chain that exports shrimp from the Philippines, for example, capitalism exploits women in a poor country as nonwaged producers of commodities in order to export cheap food to the core. In this context, the low wages, malnutrition, and degraded ecosystems of Philippine subsistence fishing households keep global prices low, permitting the distant consumer to avoid the actual costs of production. While the distant fisher wife and her children go lacking in essential protein and iron, the Japanese housewife feeds her offspring an abundance of hidden Philippine household sacrifices for which she does not pay (Dunaway and Macabuac 2007).

**How capitalists externalize costs to households**

In addition to these hidden semiproletarian subsidies, capitalists maximize profits by externalizing costs of production to households and to the ecosystems that provision them (Dunaway 2001, 2012). Routinely, capitalists externalize most of the real costs of commodity production, and these “unseen and unpaid bills … are to be found at every node/link of every commodity chain” (Wallerstein 1995). Households absorb production and distribution costs from commodity chains at six levels. First, capitalism externalizes to mothers the costs associated with the bearing and raising of successive generations of laborers. Despite its dependency upon this natural female contribution, however, capitalism has externalized child rearing outside the realm of the economic (Mies et al 1988: 29). Moreover, the household is the site in which women undertake unpaid labor for those members who are waged laborers. To generate family survival requirements,
women engage in “shadow work” outside formal capitalist structures (von Verhlof 1983). Since the household is the foundation from which members are rendered capable of selling their labor to capitalists, the capabilities of households to absorb externalized costs are preconditions for waged labor. Perhaps the most expensive externalized costs are health care-giving and medical treatment for workers injured on capitalist jobs. “Hence, the housewife and her labour are not outside of surplus value production, but constitute the very foundation upon which this process can get started. The housewife and her labour are, in other words, the basis of the process of capital accumulation” (Mies 1986: 31).

The second category of externalized costs consists of threats to household survival. Routinely, capitalism generates chronic scarcity of resources that are needed to supply the basic survival needs of households. Capitalism “has always been unsustainable since it has assumed, from the start and continues to assume, extermination and hunger for an increasingly large part of humanity” (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa 1999: 17). Even though capitalism cannot grow without the profits that accrue from exploitation of the world’s households, the modern world-system perpetuates poverty and inequality by concentrating assets and resources into a very few hands. Capitalists also expropriate and degrade land and natural resources that are essential to household provisioning. Through super-exploitation of semiproletarian labor, capitalists appropriate “so many of the fruits of the workers’ labor that the workers cannot maintain themselves or reproduce their labor power” (Frank 1981: 87). In addition, capitalist enterprises target a small minority of Global South workers while “preventing the majority from entering the occupational niches that export-oriented economic policies foster.” As a result, “workers are leaving waged employment and self-employment at earlier moments in their lives, and they are becoming disposable earlier and younger than in the past” (de la Rocha 2001: 92, 88). Moreover, capitalist commodity chains replace household crafts with imports and capture a high proportion of local consumer goods for export production. In every historical epoch, capitalism has endangered or monopolized the ecological resources that households need for survival. The modern world-system has inflicted on the Global South steadily declining biodiversity and fresh water, global warming, rising sea levels and desertification. Capitalist agriculture has degraded so much of the world’s soil that the percentage of arable land has declined to critical levels (Goldfrank et al 1999). Since agricultural production has been increasingly integrated into world commodity chains, Global South food self-sufficiency has declined sharply. Peripheral countries now import two-thirds or more of the food needed for local consumption, raising the prices of basic survival needs above levels that the poor can afford (McMichael 1994). Since 1900, the proportion of hungry and malnourished people in the world has risen, and per-capita calorie intake has steadily declined in the Global South (United Nations 1999).

The third category of externalized costs results when households are forced to restructure their boundaries and internal dynamics in reaction to capitalist disruption of societies. To confront economic crises or rapid innovation, the household has repeatedly been “redefined and reshaped as part of the pulling and tugging that constitutes accumulation on a world scale” (McGuire et al 1986). Historically, households have repeatedly been forced to alter their composition in reaction to growing immiseration caused by capitalism (Korzeniewicz and Smith 1996). Such household restructuring occurs in reaction to capitalist incorporation of a geographical area, to offset the effects of the widening and deepening of capitalism in an area, or to adjust to the economic cycles of the world-economy (Smith and Wallerstein 1992). In order to force the emergence of households oriented around the reproduction of wage laborers, capitalist states implement policies that eliminate the communal and inter-household networking systems of precapitalist communities (Dunaway 2008; Smith and Wallerstein 1992). Even when capitalist states have initiated policies that were intended to speed up proletarianization,
the vast majority of the laborers have been marginalized from waged occupations (Arrighi and Saul 1968; Dunaway 2011).

The fourth category of externalized costs results from the household disruption associated with the export of surplus laborers. In every historical era, capitalism has destabilized households by removing members for labor migrations (Dunaway 2008, 2012). In order to centralize capitalist labor forces in cities, capitalists have historically depopulated rural areas, decomposed households, and weakened their provisioning capacity (Goldfrank et al 1999). Women’s reproductive work has been restructured internationally to redistribute core household “care” work onto peripheral women, as evidenced by the current transnational migration of domestic servants, the emergence of an international baby market, and the booming international sex tourism industry (Dalla Costa and Dalla Costa 1999). To permit migrants to be employed in distant countries, contemporary “transnational families” absorb the shortfalls caused by absent members. Through the “international transfer of caregiving,” migrant domestic workers shift their reproductive labor from their peripheral children to affluent women in richer countries. In turn, the migrant women must transfer to poorer females in their home countries their child care and unpaid household labor (Parrenas 2005).

Because capitalists need to stimulate the emergence of “households of a shape and form that will create an optimal market for wage-goods” (Wallerstein et al 1982: 441), the fifth category of externalized costs results from unpaid consumption work. Through the work she does to locate and purchase, to assemble and to utilize, or to make commodities edible, the consumer-housewife does unpaid labor “in order to lower the costs for the realization of capital” (Mies 1986: 126). As the Global South becomes increasingly dependent on food imports, women must increase their daily work hours to locate scarce goods at affordable prices, to transport them home, and to prepare them for consumption. At the same time, the household also absorbs rising prices for foods that were previously obtained through household provisioning or informal sector activities (von Verhlof 1983). Moreover, reallocation of household labor time toward the pursuit of capitalist commodities leads to the decline of handicraft production, causing loss of livelihood for thousands of households (Dunaway 2011, 2012; Dunaway and Macabuac 2007; Tabak and Crichlow 2000).

The greater risks that are suffered by women and girls represent the sixth category of externalized costs. Because the inequalities are so stark, it is easy to be fooled into thinking that all peripheral men, women, and children experience the same degrees of immiseration. However, the world-system has structured “a modern form of patriarchal relations, in which women experience a social reality very different from their brothers in capital or labor” (O’Connor 1994: 108–09). Consequently, peripheral men and women do not experience the same degrees of exclusion and poverty. If we are to capture the workings of the household, therefore, we must recognize that there are two classes of people among the semiproletarians: the double exploited (women) and those who are both exploited/exploiters (men). Indeed, males are able to mitigate their own exploitation “by appropriating the labor-power/sexuality and bodies of women” (von Verhlof 1980: 40–41). Even though females contribute more work hours than males to household survival, women control very little wealth or land. Moreover, 70 percent of the world’s illiterate adults are women, and there is a rising worldwide incidence of female-headed households and feminization of poverty (United Nations 1999, 2003). Women are disproportionately endangered by the ecological degradation that accompanies capitalist development, and they are the household members who must contribute labor to care for those made ill by environmental risks or resource depletion (Dunaway and Macabuac 2007). Water scarcity, desertification, deforestation, land degradation, and coastal pollution pose inequitable hardships for women. Malnutrition is the most fundamental act of environmental sexism that is inflicted by the capitalist world-system upon women and girls. Half of all peripheral children die before age ten, and females are disproportionately represented among those deaths (United Nations 1999, 2003). Capitalism also externalizes to females the nutritional battering of children associated
with high fertility rates that accompany malnutrition and illiteracy in about one-third of all peripheral countries (Ward 1985).

Because the modern world-system has institutionalized the cultural devaluation of the work of women and girls (Wallerstein et al 1982), integration into capitalist commodity chains brings destructive economic results for women. Historically and currently, women have been targeted for the dirtiest, most back-breaking aspects of the capitalist production process while higher-skilled, higher-paying artisan jobs have been reserved for males (United Nations 2003). In the face of capitalist expansion, peripheral women lose artisan jobs to imports and see their local markets subsumed by commercialized agriculture (Dunaway 2008, 2011; Mies et al 1988, Pickering 2000). To keep production costs low, capitalists are breaking the bodies of peripheral girls and young women at an alarming rate. By eliminating safety equipment and sanitary working conditions, corporations externalize to females the health costs of industrial injuries and disabilities, work-related diseases, and the higher incidence of birth defects and mother mortality due to exposure to chemicals and industrial waste. In the face of grossly inadequate medical systems, domestic violence increases when capitalist enterprises target female workers and exclude males (Mies 1986; United Nations 2003).

**Future research directions**

Think of the mythological image of Atlas carrying the planet on his back. Then visualize Global South households carrying world capitalism through their visible and invisible inputs and sacrifices. Originating in foundational world-systems thinking (Wallerstein 1974), the commodity chain concept offers a tool through which we can undertake future research about the centrality of households to the modern world-system. Commodity chains incorporate households and communities into complex networks of unequal exchange that insure the polarized division of surplus among core, semiperiphery, and periphery (Wallerstein 1983). Because they maximize profits by merging numerous forms of paid and unpaid labor and resources, commodity chains are the mechanisms through which capitalists drain surpluses from the Global South in the forms of payment of below-subsistence wages, absorption of hidden subsidies from households, and externalization of production costs to local communities. In short, a household does not have to earn capitalist wages or contract piece-rate homework to be integrated into commodity chains, but those other mechanisms of surplus drain are almost always overlooked by scholars.

Bringing households and gender into commodity chains is ground-breaking research that has yet to be done, and I have previously posed five research questions that need to be pursued (Dunaway 2001). Researchers are not facing a void as they undertake this effort. Dunaway (2008, 2011, 2012) more fully conceptualizes the ideas presented briefly here. Previous groundwork has been laid to quantify gendered work inequalities and market value of unpaid household labor (cf. Antonopoulos and Hirway 2010), and global institutions now pressure Global South governments to develop accounting systems that merge unpaid household labor into GNP (UN 2003). Some case studies (e.g., Ramamurthy 2004) offer feminist analyses of commodity chains. Numerous published studies (e.g., Ferguson 2007) provide guidance about the kinds of nonwaged labors and resources that need to be integrated into commodity chain analysis (cf. Dunaway 2012). In addition, several feminists have explored the externalities associated with labor subcontracting (Salzinger 2003), as well as labor resistance within commodity chains (Hale and Wills 2006).

**References**


