

## The enduring debate over unpaid labour

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Conceptual and theoretical norms are at the root of statistical biases leading to the underestimation of women's work in labour force and national accounting statistics. Initially viewed as a way of making women's work more visible, the effort to account for women's work has gradually evolved to include all unpaid work by whomever it is performed (men, women, children). The evolution of this effort illustrates how the questions raised by feminists have a relevance transcending feminism and challenging basic tenets in conventional economic thinking.

Ester Boserup, in her classic 1970 book, *Woman's role in economic development*, pointed out that "the subsistence activities usually omitted in the statistics of production and income are largely women's work" (Boserup, 1970, p. 163). She was a pioneer in emphasizing the time-consuming character of these activities which, in rural economies, include physically demanding tasks such as fetching wood and carrying water as well as food production and the "crude processing of basic foods".

Even earlier, Margaret Reid, in her 1934 book, *Economics of household production*, expressed concern about the exclusion of domestic production from national income accounts and designed a method to estimate the value of home-based work. Then, from the late 1960s, the international women's movement prepared the ground for a new look at the estimation of women's economic activities. The issue was then seen as symbolizing society's undervaluation of women and of their contribution to social well-being. The four world conferences on women held under the auspices of the United Nations since 1975 have been instrumental in getting the topic incorporated into the United Nations agendas and subsequent plans of action. At a different level, Marilyn Waring's 1988 book, *If women counted*, contributed to making the issue better known to a large audience. Over the past 20 years, national governments and individual researchers and activist groups have contributed significantly to this effort.

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An important body of mainstream literature has developed on time allocation data, including unpaid work. The first systematic collection of these data occurred in the USSR in 1924, the objective then being to collect information about specific topics such as leisure time and community-oriented work (Juster and Stafford, 1991). Since the 1960s, national and comparative studies of time use have been carried out for a variety of purposes, such as the expansion of national accounting statistics and the analysis of household behaviour. This work has taken place in both industrialized and developing countries (for a summary of the literature and definitions, see Goldschmidt-Clermont, 1982; Juster and Stafford, 1991). Such studies, although useful and often with objectives parallel to those of the effort to account for unpaid work, do not usually include a specifically feminist concern regarding their implications for women.

This article seeks to summarize some of the theoretical and practical issues in the effort made during the past 20 years to account for women's unpaid work and assesses the current status.<sup>1</sup>

## Accounting for unpaid work

Unpaid work is still substantially underestimated in national and international statistics on the labour force, GNP, and national income. Labour force statistics and national income accounts were designed primarily to gather information about the level of remunerated economic activity and changes over time, and to provide a basis for economic policy and planning. Given that the market is generally considered to be the core focus of economic activity, the statistical concept of being "at work" is (and has been historically) defined as a subset of "employment", in terms of engagement in work "for pay or profit" (see ILO, 1955, p. 43). Likewise, the inclusion of subsistence production in national income accounts is in terms of its connection to the market. The story of the decrease in GNP when a man marries his housekeeper is well known to readers of introductory economics textbooks. The decrease occurs because, although the household activities of the housekeeper-turned-wife are unchanged — or possibly increased —, the wife is not paid a wage and so, as her work is not for the market, it is not considered economically significant.

Thus, the problem stems from the way "work" has been defined, both in theory and in conventional statistics, as a paid economic activity linked to the market. Until the Second World War, statistics on the economically active population were gathered by population censuses, but the unemployment problems arising from the Great Depression of the 1930s had already begun to generate increased interest in the collection of reliable labour statistics. In 1938, the Committee of Statistical Experts of the League of Nations recommended a definition of the concept "gainfully occupied", and drew up proposals to stand-

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<sup>1</sup> This article draws on material developed more extensively in a forthcoming book by the same author on gender and the global economy.

ardize census data in order to facilitate international comparisons (League of Nations, 1938; ILO, 1976, pp. 27-28). As a result, many countries expanded the collection of statistics on what would thenceforth be called “the labour force” (ILO, 1976, p. 25). In 1966, the United Nations Statistical Commission updated the earlier definitions, in order to provide a measure not only of the unemployed but also of labour availability. The adopted definition of “economically active population” referred to “all persons of either sex who furnish the supply of labour for the production of economic goods and services” (see ILO, 1976, p. 32). The objective of this definition was to facilitate estimates not only of employment and unemployment but of underemployment as well (for a more detailed account, see Benería, 1982).

Another aspect of this definition was the assumed link between the labour force and national product — active labour being defined as that which contributes to the national product plus the unemployed. This definition led to questionable measurements of work. Family members working part time can be classified as employed or underemployed when working in agriculture but not when engaged in household production, which means the exclusion of a large proportion of unpaid work from national product and income accounting as well as from labour force statistics. However, the problem of underestimation of unpaid work and the reasons underlying it differ for each of the four sectors in which unpaid work predominates, namely, subsistence production, the household economy, the informal sector, and volunteer work.

### *The subsistence sector*

Despite considerable efforts made from 1938 onwards to improve labour force and national accounting statistics, the basic concepts remained essentially untouched until the late 1970s. One important exception was the effort to include estimates of subsistence production in GNP accounts. Methods to estimate the value of subsistence production and the proportion of the population engaged in it were recommended in the United Nations system of national accounts (SNA) from the 1950s, particularly for countries where this sector was relatively important. Thus, countries such as Nepal, Papua New Guinea, Tanzania and others developed methods of estimating the contributions of subsistence production to GNP. In 1960 a working party of African statisticians recommended that estimates of rural household activities, such as the backyard cultivation of vegetables, could and should be added to those of subsistence production in agriculture, forestry and fishing (Waring, 1988). Systematic implementation was another matter.

The effort to estimate subsistence production was advanced in 1982 when the Thirteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians adopted a resolution incorporating the United Nations’ 1966 definition of “economically active population”, i.e. “all persons of either sex who furnish the supply of economic goods and services” (ILO, 1983, p. I/2). Whether or not this supply was furnished through the market was irrelevant. Although it was not entirely clear what constituted “economic goods and services”, the new definition intro-

duced an exception to the market criterion, justified by the notion that subsistence production represents “marketable goods”. Consequently, it seemed logical to view the workers engaged in that sector as part of the labour force, including “family labour”. Thus, despite the practical difficulties in estimating the market value of subsistence production, it became accepted practice without important theoretical or conceptual objections. The objective was to arrive at more accurate estimates of GNP and of economic growth or, as Ester Boserup had put it:

{T}he present system of under-reporting subsistence activities not only makes the underdeveloped countries seem poorer than they really are in comparison with the more developed countries, but it also makes their rate of economic growth appear in a more favorable light than the facts warrant, since economic development entails a gradual replacement of the omitted subsistence activities by the creation of income in the non-subsistence sector which is recorded more correctly (Boserup, 1970, p. 163).

In practice, however, the participation of women in subsistence production is still not fully accounted for, partly because the boundaries between agricultural and domestic work can be difficult to trace, particularly for women. To the extent that women’s unpaid agricultural labour is highly integrated with domestic activities — e.g. food cultivation, the fetching of wood, care of animals, and many others — the distinction between the conventional classifications of family labour (in agriculture) and domestic work is very thin and a clear-cut line is difficult to draw. In practice, there is a tendency to underestimate women’s work in subsistence production whenever it is classified as domestic work.

The same problem appears when censuses classify workers according to their “main occupation”. In such cases, the tendency to under-report female family workers in agriculture or any other type of non-domestic production is quite prevalent. Historically, such under-reporting has been observed in all regions and countries, and it was already pointed out by the ILO in 1977, referring in particular to north Africa and south-west Asia where “female unpaid family workers were, to a very large extent, not recorded” (ILO, 1977, p. 11). Since then, there has been an effort to include this category of workers in the labour force statistics of many countries. Even so, there is still reason to believe that under-reporting continues to occur for many reasons ranging from the relative irregularity of women’s work in agriculture — for example, when it is mostly seasonal or marginal — to the deeply ingrained view, which assumes multiple cultural and historical forms, that “women’s place is in the home”. As a result national statistics regarding women’s work are unreliable or non-existent and it is very difficult to make meaningful international comparisons (for further details, see Benería, 1982).

### *The informal sector*

The sparse statistical information on the informal sector presents a different type of problem. This sector comprises a wide array of activities ranging from the clandestine production of (legal) goods and services to officially sanc-

tioned micro-enterprises in all sorts of industries. In this case, the measurement problem is not one of conceptualization, given that the informal sector largely involves paid activities which fall within conventional definitions of work; the problem is posed by the difficulties of obtaining reliable statistics.

The absence of appropriate and systematic data collection in this case is a significant problem because the sector covers a large (and often growing) proportion of the workforce in many countries.<sup>2</sup> For women, the informal sector often provides a primary, if precarious, source of income. Their informal activities range from home work (industrial piece-work, for example) to preparing and selling foods on the streets, to self-employment and work in micro-enterprises. Contrary to earlier expectations, informal sector activities have not been gradually replaced by formal sector work; in fact, in many countries they have tended to absorb the large numbers of people who remained marginal to the “modern economy” or were expelled from it when unemployment rose (Portes and Castells, 1989). To be sure, many case studies and efforts at data collection of informal activities have been made, but the difficulties of systematic gathering of information are enormous as they mostly derive from the invisible and even clandestine character of significant portions of this sector — often involving activities that are bordering on the illegal — and from its unstable, precarious and unregulated nature.

However, periodic and systematic country surveys can provide estimates of the sector’s weight in labour force and GNP estimates. For example, the United Nations prepared conceptual and methodological guidelines for the measurement of women’s work in the informal sector — including industry and services — and carried out useful pilot studies, as in Burkina Faso, the Congo, the Gambia, and Zambia (UN Statistical Office/ECA/INSTRAW, 1991a and 1991b; INSTRAW, 1991). In each case, microeconomic survey data have been combined with macroeconomic information, according to data availability in each country. The objective of this information-gathering effort is to facilitate policy design and action to improve the working conditions of informal sector workers and to strengthen their bargaining power.

### *Domestic work*

Domestic production and related activities pose problems less of underestimation than of total exclusion, because such activities have been perceived as simply falling outside the conventional definition of work. Historically, even authors who were open to the idea of defining domestic work as “production” did not accord it much priority. As stated by Blades, for example, “the production boundary should encompass non-monetary activities which are likely to be replaced by monetary activities as an economy becomes more specialized,” but

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<sup>2</sup> To illustrate, according to estimates presented at the 1998 annual meeting of the Inter-American Development Bank, four out of every five new jobs in Latin America are created in the informal sector, which accounts for 57 per cent of the region’s workforce (*The Economist*, 1998).

he concluded that "because of the practical difficulties of measurement the case for including housewives' general services is considerably weaker" (Blades, 1975, p. 7).

As mentioned earlier, apart from a few exceptions such as Margaret Reid, this exclusion was not much questioned until the late 1970s. Boserup argued strongly for the inclusion in national accounts "of food items obtained by collecting and hunting, of output of home crafts such as clothing, footwear, sleeping and sitting mats, baskets, clay pots, calabashes, fuel collected by women, funeral services, hair cuts, entertainment, and traditional administrative and medical services," together with "pounding, husking and grinding of food-stuffs and the slaughtering of animals" (Boserup, 1970, pp. 162-163). However, she saw these activities as mostly subsistence production, i.e. as "marketable goods," not as domestic work. Although she mentioned the omission of "domestic services of housewives" from national accounts, she was more vociferous about the exclusion of subsistence production. Yet she did also mention the need to include production for own consumption which is larger in the less industrialized and agricultural countries than in the more industrialized regions.

A reversal has been observed in the trend for domestic work to shift to the market as countries develop. As labour costs have increased over the years in the high-income countries, there has been a significant increase in self-help activities such as home construction, carpentry and repairs, which are often performed by men. These activities are then added to the bulk of unpaid work at the household level, a trend reinforced by a decreasing tendency to hire domestic workers in these countries (Langfeldt, 1987; Chadeau, 1989; UNDP, 1995). There is a debate about the extent to which the average number of market hours worked have decreased in the United States, for example, and some authors have estimated that the time allocated to unpaid work by men and women tended to converge between the 1960s and 1980s, a tendency also observed in other industrialized countries. However, these estimates do not take into consideration the extent to which many tasks are performed simultaneously. Floro, for example, has argued there is "growing evidence that the performance of overlapping activities over prolonged periods especially by women is not an isolated phenomenon" (Floro, 1995, p. 1920). As women's participation in market work has increased, work intensification resulting from overlapping activities requires a revision of the convergence thesis.

To sum up, production tends to shift out of the household during the development process, though at least part of it may return later, whether it is performed by women or men. If household production is not accounted for, growth rates are likely to be overestimated when this production shifts to the market; but they are likely to be underestimated when (normally) paid activities are taken up by (unpaid) household members. Given the dominant division of labour and women's role in the domestic sphere, the exclusion affects mostly but not exclusively women's work.

## *Volunteer work*

As in domestic work, the wide range of tasks carried out in the charitable sector and the fact that these tasks are not directly linked to the market create both conceptual and methodological problems for their measurement. Volunteer work means work whose beneficiaries are not members of the immediate family and for which there cannot be any direct payment; furthermore, the work must be part of an organized programme. Volunteer work is thus clearly different from domestic work, though there are close connections between the two — as when volunteer work is carried out in a neighbourhood or community context — which can make the boundaries difficult to draw. In addition, while it is easy to define some charitable tasks as productive work, for instance, those done by unpaid job training and home-building organizations, others are more difficult to classify, for instance, some of the activities associated with a church. Yet even in the latter case, it is important to account for these tasks in some way, particularly if they provide free substitutes for what otherwise would have to be paid for in the market. Moreover, volunteer work is often of a professional nature, as in the case of the relatively high number of voluntary workers in the health sector (Gora and Nemerowicz, 1991).

Many factors influence the extent to which people engage in volunteer work, and the abundant gender asymmetries in this type of work show that gender is one them. In the United States women are more likely than men to engage in it, particularly married and relatively well-educated women with children aged under 18. There are many aspects to these gendered disparities, amongst them the fact that while cash contributions to charity (mostly by men) are tax-deductible, contributions in time (mostly by women) are not. In New Zealand, women mobilized around this issue in the mid-1980s, with the result that a question about time dedicated to volunteer work was included in the 1986 census of population (Waring, 1988).

Similarly, volunteer work also varies according to social characteristics. In the United States, a survey conducted in 1996 showed that it was correlated with income: the highest proportion (62 per cent) was among people with an annual income over US\$75,000 and the lowest among those with an annual income below US\$20,000 (AARP, 1997). However, these differences may be misleading since much remains to be done to document volunteer work worldwide. Amongst the poor, it can represent very significant individual and collective actions in times of crisis. One well-known example is the collective soup kitchens in the Andean countries during the 1980s and 1990s. Organized and run mostly by women, they functioned as means of survival in face of the drastic deterioration of living standards that resulted from structural adjustment policies and increasing urban poverty. It has been estimated that, in Lima, they involved 40,000 low-income women who jointly organized a federation of self-managed communal kitchens, located in 2,000 sites in Lima's poor neighbourhoods, pooling their resources to feed about 200,000 people as frequently as five times a week (Barrig, 1996; Lind, 1990). Managing such an impressive endeavour requires a wide range of skills — from contacting food providers to

handling money and dealing with charitable institutions and other funding sources — some of which were acquired by the women as they engaged in survival strategies for their families and neighbours.

In fact, collective food kitchens raise questions about the conventional definition of volunteer work provided above, since the beneficiaries often include both members of the immediate family *and* of the community or neighbourhood, hence they straddle the boundaries between domestic and volunteer work. They also raise questions about the extent to which participation in volunteer work is freely chosen, since in the case of soup kitchens, it stems from urgent survival needs and from the inability of each individual household to meet these alone. Clearly, collective soup kitchens are not exclusive to the Andean region. They take different forms and are also to be found in high-income countries. In the United States for example, soup kitchens serving the poor, unemployed and often homeless are often run by women.<sup>3</sup>

To sum up, accounting for women's work thus involved efforts on two fronts from the start. First, it required the refinement of categories and the improvement of data collection in those areas of paid work that were, in theory at least, included in conventional statistics. Second, it was the result of the need to rethink and redefine the concept of work and to develop ways of measuring unpaid work mostly involving domestic and volunteer work. The focus below will be on domestic work.

## The progress of two decades

Although questions and objections still remain about the extent to which unpaid work should be measured, much progress has been made on practical issues over the past 20 years. This progress has occurred mainly on three fronts: conceptual, theoretical and methodological.

### *Progress on the conceptual front*

As a result of a recommendation by the First World Conference on Women held in Nairobi in 1985, the United Nations International Research and Training Institute for the Advancement of Women (INSTRAW) and the Statistical Office of the United Nations Secretariat took the lead in reviewing and promoting the revision of national accounts and other statistical information on women's work. Most recommendations have suggested the development of separate or supplementary accounts that would permit the generation of "augmented" estimates of GNP (United Nations, 1989).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> A soup kitchen visited by the author in an East Los Angeles church in 1992 was run entirely by Spanish-speaking women, who served dinner to about 100 men a day.

<sup>4</sup> For more details, see Benería (1992).



The purpose of such “satellite accounts” is to measure the unpaid production of goods and services by households and to provide indicators of their contribution to welfare. This can be done either by using time as a unit of measurement — as in time-use surveys — or by imputing a monetary value to time inputs or to the goods and services produced. Given the numerous and varied tasks being performed in the home, the question of which tasks to include has been at the centre of discussion. The most accepted operational criterion is Margaret Reid’s third-party principle, according to which domestic production refers to unpaid activities that can be performed by a third person for pay. Clearly, this criterion includes tasks such as shopping, cleaning, food preparation and childcare; it does not include leisure or personal activities such as watching television or getting dressed. This still leaves some ambiguities (the very rich or the ill may employ someone to help them dress), but on the whole it represents an important step in setting a standard of definition that can allow comparisons between countries.

The third-party principle has been criticized for assuming the market as the model of economic activity and therefore precluding “the existence of economic activity unique to the household, since anything that does not, or does not yet, have a commodity equivalent cannot be considered economic” (Wood, 1997, p. 50). But, although the principle assumes market production as the point of reference, it does not follow that a domestic activity without a market equivalent cannot be included; it can, as long as a third party can perform it. Wood goes further in criticizing the principle for its exclusion of personal activities such as “emotional caretaking, sex and childbirth from definitions of economic activity” (Wood, 1997, p. 52). This argument, however, brings the discussion of what should be considered “work” to a level at which it is very difficult to differentiate it from leisure and personal enjoyment. In any case, what needs to be emphasized is that, overall, a significant shift has taken place in the conceptualization of economic activity towards the inclusion of tasks that contribute to social reproduction and the maintenance of the labour force and which are not directly connected with the market.

### *Progress on the theoretical front*

At the theoretical level, significant changes preceded or occurred in parallel with the conceptual and practical work on this issue over the past two decades, particularly as regards achieving greater understanding of the nature of domestic production. Since the 1950s, and especially the 1960s, economic analysis has focused increasingly on the household, within the framework of various theoretical paradigms and objectives. The neoclassical literature, particularly the New Household Economics, has analysed household production as a way to understand the gender division of labour and the participation of men and women in the paid labour force (Lloyd, 1975; Becker, 1991). Feminist versions of this analysis have pointed out some of its shortcomings and have placed greater emphasis on the social construction of gender roles and the extent to which it results in gender discrimination (Blau and Ferber, 1986). On the other hand,

within the Marxian paradigm, the domestic labour debate of the 1970s emphasized the importance of domestic work for the daily maintenance and reproduction of the labour force. The emphasis here was on understanding the nature of domestic work, its links to the market, and the economic and social power relations established between paid and unpaid domestic work and between men and women (Gardiner, 1975; Molyneux, 1979; Deere, 1990). Questions about the application of the notion of exploitation to domestic work were also raised in the 1980s (Folbre, 1982).

From a feminist perspective, neither of these two approaches paid enough attention to gender and power relations within the household. However, they were useful in enhancing understanding of the economic significance of domestic work and the need to develop methods to evaluate its contribution to production and welfare. The more strictly feminist analyses further contributed to the elaboration of the theoretical dimensions of domestic work, and their political implications (Hartmann, 1987; Folbre, 1994; Bergmann, 1995).<sup>5</sup>

A different debate has occurred around one of the main obstacles to measuring household production and voluntary work, namely, the difficulty of comparing them with market production in view of the very different motives underlying such activities and the very different conditions under which they are carried out. In particular, as domestic work is not subject to the competitive pressures of the market, productivity levels in the two domains may differ considerably. Likewise, the quality of outputs can differ substantially, as in the case of childcare, the provision of meals, nurturing services and many other activities. Similar arguments can be applied to volunteer work. Is the problem then one of comparing like with unlike? This issue will be examined in greater detail below.

Of course, the effort to measure and document unpaid work has a number of purposes. One important objective is to bring the issue to light and render it socially appreciated. A second objective is to establish indicators of the contribution of unpaid work to social well-being and the reproduction of human resources, and to provide the basis for revising GNP and labour force statistics to that end. Third, the measurement of unpaid work is crucial to analyse the extent to which total work (paid and unpaid) is shared equally at household and society levels. Fourth, at both micro and macro levels, it can provide information on how time is allocated to paid and unpaid work and to leisure. Fifth, it is crucial to the attempt to give a gender dimension to budgets in order to make explicit that they are not neutral tools of resource allocation (Bakker and Elson, 1998). Sixth, the measurement of unpaid domestic work has associated practical uses, such as in litigation and in estimating monetary compensation in divorce cases (Cassels, 1993; Collins, 1993). Seventh, even if productivity levels are not comparable, time-use indicators can be used to analyse tendencies

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<sup>5</sup> For more details, see Benería (1995).

and trends in the share of paid/unpaid work over time. Finally, all of these can help governments and other institutions to design policy and action more effectively.

### Progress on methodology

At the methodological level, substantial progress has been made on two fronts. One is the revision of data-gathering methods to capture with greater accuracy the contributions to GNP made by the various types of unpaid work (see below). The other is dealing with the complex task of designing methods to measure the value of unpaid work. The focus here is largely on domestic work, differentiating between input- and output-related methods and showing the difficulties and advantages of each. Time-budget studies and surveys carried out in many countries have provided the empirical base for such a task, often with large sample sizes. Empirical studies have also been useful to analyse the actual content and complexities of domestic work and household dynamics. Two main approaches to measuring the value of domestic work have been introduced: one based on the imputation of value to labour time (an input-related method) and another based on the imputation of market prices to goods and services produced in the domestic sphere (an output-related method).

Different estimation methods have been used for each approach. For the input-related method, the problem is the value to impute to labour time. Three main methods have been identified:<sup>6</sup>

- The *global substitute* method uses the cost of a hired domestic worker, paid to carry out all types of household tasks;
- The *specialized substitute* method uses the average wage of a specialist with the appropriate skills for each specific household task;
- The *opportunity cost* method is based on the wage that the person performing domestic work can receive in the market.<sup>7</sup>

Each of these methods has advantages and disadvantages. The global substitute method tends to give very low estimates, given that domestic workers are at the lower end of the wage hierarchy. Moreover, a domestic worker is not likely to do all the work of the household; unless the full contribution of all household members is included, this will further reinforce the tendency toward low estimates. The specialized substitute method tends to generate high estimates, even though it is more indicative of the market value of household production. One practical problem associated with this method is the need to disaggregate each task, with the corresponding problems — mentioned earlier — of comparing unpaid and paid work. The opportunity cost method gives the

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<sup>6</sup> For more details see, for example, Goldschmidt-Clermont (1982 and 1987), Benería (1992) and Fraumeni (1998).

<sup>7</sup> A variation of the opportunity cost method is the *lifetime income approach* (see Fraumeni, 1998).

widest range of estimates, depending on the skills and opportunity wage of the individual involved. This can result in rather absurd estimates since, for example, a meal prepared by a doctor will be imputed a higher value than an identical meal prepared by an unskilled worker, even if the latter is a better cook. Another problem in this case has been pointed out repeatedly: the fact that, if the cook is a full-time housewife, her opportunity costs (i.e. the income she would get in the paid labour force) are themselves correlated to her condition as a full-time housewife.

As for output-related estimates, they require some method for imputing value to domestic production and deducting the cost of inputs from it. Again the problem is determining which market goods and services are equivalent to those produced at home, and the price to impute to inputs such as labour and raw materials not purchased in the market (e.g. wood gathered by family members, or home-made utensils). Yet another problem is disparities in the quality of goods and services produced, which cannot be captured by an imputed “price”. At the empirical level, this involves a tedious method requiring time-budget data, hourly wages, and a relatively high number of input and output prices (Goldschmidt-Clermont, 1987). While some of those data can be obtained from existing censuses, most have to be generated through surveys; this is precisely the type of information that satellite accounts could provide periodically. How often they should be elaborated depends on available resources and projected needs. Lutzel (1989), for example, suggested that they could be obtained every few years instead of annually.

Input vs. output methods raise other issues regarding their usefulness. For example, if the time needed to fetch water increases, input-related accounting will show an increase in time input while there is no corresponding increase in output. This suggests that, in terms of well-being, an output-related method is superior since it shows changes in well-being more accurately. Yet, from the perspective of documenting the time needed for domestic work, the input-related method is more explicit. Furthermore, the institutional and social dimensions of time complicate this issue. As Floro (1997) has argued, the notion of time and its uses varies from one country and culture to another, and, in some cases, activities that Westerners might see as recreational — such as traditional festivities and gift exchange — can represent unpaid work in other societies.

### *Emergence of new issues*

The attempt to account for unpaid work continues to be important, as current labour market trends raise new questions about the links between paid and unpaid work and about their distribution and boundaries. A transition is currently taking place in the ways in which this distribution is affecting individuals, households and communities across countries.

First, the increasing participation of women in the paid labour force has reinforced the importance of the distribution of paid and unpaid work within the family. This is therefore an important gender equality issue.

Second, in the industrialized world the unemployed and marginalized from mainstream economic life have to negotiate survival strategies that involve an increasing reliance on unpaid work and even some forms of labour exchange not included in conventional statistics.<sup>8</sup> The same can be said for developing countries applying structural adjustment policies, which have resulted in the intensification of unpaid work in the household and in the community.

Third, the high incidence of underemployment and of part-time work in both high-income countries and the developing world results in cyclical or fluid combinations of paid and unpaid work which affect women and men in different ways. As will be argued below, measures of these changes are important to the assessment of variations in living standards and in contributions to social well-being. Similarly the current debate about the 35-hour week taking place particularly in western Europe has many gender implications for the distribution of paid and unpaid work. These discussions are conducted on the assumption that a reduction in working time will help to deal with unemployment. But, as Figart and Mutari have argued, the underlying assumption is that full-time, year-round employment is a social norm constructed around gendered assumptions, for instance that a full-time worker, presumably male, faces limited demands from unpaid work and family life (Figart and Mutari, 1998). A further assumption, they argue, is that the concentration of women in part-time work will continue, regardless of women's preferences. In the same way, households with more than one earner need to address the question of the distribution of working time if they are concerned about gender equality and about ensuring that caring work is fairly shared among household members.

Finally, given that unpaid work represents roughly between a quarter and a half of economic activity, depending on the country, its exclusion from national accounts is difficult to justify. There is some evidence that domestic work is increasing faster than market production. Australian data, for example, indicate that, between 1974 and 1992, household work grew at a rate of 2.4 per cent per year while the corresponding rate for market production was 1.2 per cent (Ironmonger, 1996). This can be attributed to a variety of causes ranging from the rapid increase in the number of small households (resulting in a loss in economies of scale), to the growing proportion of older people in the population, and to growing affluence. Ironmonger (1996) notes that this has happened despite an increase in female labour force participation rates and despite the diffusion of labour-saving household technologies.

All this explains why there has been increasing awareness of the importance of the sex distribution of paid and unpaid work in connection with achieving gender equality. The opening lines of the *Human Development Report 1995* underline this point: "One of the defining movements of the 20th century has

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<sup>8</sup> These strategies may consist of a form of paid work outside the mainstream monetary system, as when the creation of a local currency facilitates exchanges. One such case has been developed in Ithaca, NY, where "Ithaca money" is issued locally and used to exchange labour services as well as to purchase from the local stores that accept it. Even though these cases have little weight for the economy as a whole, they can be important at the local level and provide interesting examples of survival strategies.

been the relentless struggle for gender equality ... When this struggle finally succeeds — as it must — it will mark a great milestone in human progress. And along the way it will change most of today's premises for social, economic and political life" (UNDP, 1995, p. 1).

This forceful statement in defence of gender equality precedes the figures on the distribution of paid/unpaid work across countries, which were included for the first time in this edition of the report. The 1996 report of the Independent Commission on Population and Quality of Life (ICPQL), *Caring for the future*, also includes a call for the redefinition of work and for equality in the distribution of its output: "The Commission proposes ... to redefine work in a broad sense that encompasses both employment and unpaid activities ... benefiting society as a whole, families as well as individuals, and ensuring equitable distribution of the wealth generated" (ICPQL, 1996, p. 147).

Clearly, the effort to redefine work and measure unpaid work has gained much support. However, there is also opposition to it, as is to be expected given the complexity of the issue. The following section examines the various arguments casting doubt on this effort.

## The continuing critiques

At least three types of objection have emerged against this effort to account for unpaid work. Two of them come from feminist circles; the third springs from the core of orthodox economics.

### *Useless effort*

The first objection, which may be termed "the waste-of-time argument", results from the fear that the energy and resources required to generate statistics on unpaid work will have no impact on those engaged in it, particularly women. To what extent, for example, can such information serve to decrease the burden borne by poor women who have to toil many hours every day? Can it serve to increase their bargaining power at some level? This argument maintains that, in fact, greater social recognition of the importance of domestic work may rigidify further a division of labour which already relegates women to activities providing no financial autonomy and little control over the resources they need. Clearly such a result would not contribute to gender equality; on the contrary, it would perpetuate women's dependence on men. This argument reflects the doubts felt by some after the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women, held in Nairobi in 1985. The report of that conference, setting out the *Nairobi Forward-looking Strategies for the Advancement of Women*, strongly recommended that appropriate efforts be made to measure the contribution of women's paid and unpaid work "to all aspects and sectors of development" — a first at the time (United Nations, 1985, p. 32, para. 120). The report thus significantly moved the action forward yet, in so doing, it also raised doubts about whether setting this agenda would make a qualitative difference to women's lives (see United Nations, 1985).

A similar version of this argument has been put forward by Barbara Bergmann who, though not objecting to the effort to account for unpaid work, considers that too much energy is spent on it. In her view, feminists should stress the need for women to engage in paid work in order to reduce their dependence on men and to increase their bargaining power in and outside the home. Thus, they should first focus their efforts on designing and implementing policies that facilitate the integration of women into the paid labour force, for example, childcare provision and maternity leave. Second, they should develop policies and action to enforce gender equality in the labour market, such as pay equity, affirmative action and comparable worth programmes. Bergmann is very sceptical that improved information on unpaid work can help women or that the inclusion in the calculation of GNP of food produced in the subsistence sector makes any difference to farmers.<sup>9</sup> She also fears that statistics on housework are likely to be used by those wishing “to glorify the housewife,” for example certain right-wing groups in the United States, which can argue that housework is irreplaceable because it performs crucial services to society. Hence, she concludes that there is an anti-feminist motive in valorizing housework.

This type of objection ignores the fact that action as well as policy design and implementation need to have available as much systematically collected information as possible in order to make optimal estimates of the wide variety of tasks involved in unpaid work. The weight and distribution of unpaid work can be important in different ways. For example, having reliable estimates of the great amount of time spent by women fetching water in any country may prevent authorities from placing a low priority on the installation of running water on the grounds that fetching water does not take up much of women’s time.

Again, too little is known about the extent to which an economic slowdown that increases unemployment and reduces income in a proportion of the population results in unpaid labour picking up the slack through the intensification of domestic work. It is known that the implementation of structural adjustment policies, such as those adopted by Third World countries in the 1980s and 1990s, led to coping strategies that required the intensification of unpaid work, of which a disproportionate burden fell on women. In such cases, a decrease in real income may not result in a corresponding decrease in well-being: it depends on the extent to which unpaid work makes up for the reduced ability to purchase goods from the market. An evaluation of these shifts cannot be made without systematic statistical information on unpaid work (Benería, 1996). As Floro has argued, more precise information on people’s daily activities would help to assess the quality of their lives more accurately, and to develop indicators of work intensity, simultaneous performance of several tasks, stress, individual health, and even child neglect. This is because various aspects of work, such as its intensity and the length of the working day, have been shown to have an impact on the stress levels and health of workers and their families (Floro, 1996).

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<sup>9</sup> Author’s conversation with Barbara Bergmann on 14 March 1998.

The effort to account for unpaid work must be viewed not as an end in itself but as a means to understand who contributes to human welfare and development and to what extent, and what action is required to distribute equally the pains and pleasures of work. The fear that some political groups might use the information for their own purposes must be set against the certainty that such information also serves to achieve a variety of positive outcomes, including the more accurate design of social policies and the organization of social safety nets.

### *The importance of "difference"*

A second objection, which mostly concerns domestic and unpaid caring work, is perhaps more difficult to respond to since it springs from the notion that certain personal and relational aspects of this activity render it qualitatively very different from market work. As Himmelweit has argued, although recognizing such activity as "work" is important in making it visible and in validating women's contributions in the home, something is lost in the process. She questions "whether the best way for women's contribution to be appreciated {is} to force it into a pre-existing category of 'work' borrowed from an economics which inherently failed to value most of what made women's domestic contribution distinctive" (Himmelweit, 1995, p. 2).

She argues, for example, that "caring" is an ambiguous concept ranging from physical to emotional care; while the first "might to some extent be independent of the relation between the carer and the person cared for," the second requires that "the person doing the caring is inseparable from the care given" (Himmelweit, 1995, p. 8). She also points out a second characteristic of caring work, namely, that it is fulfilling for the carer. Hence her reluctance to view as conventional "work" the time spent on activities to give emotional care and support, which both provide the carer with a sense of fulfilment and, furthermore, are very difficult to quantify.

Himmelweit concludes that not everything needs to be seen as either "work" or "non-work", particularly since to do so may lead to the social undervaluation of activities that do not fit into the category of work: "by insisting that domestic activities gain recognition by conforming to an unchallenged category of work, the significance of caring and self-fulfilling activities remains unrecognized" (1995, p. 14). But this argument is problematic for various reasons.

First, greater visibility and documentation for these activities are likely to increase the recognition of their significance for human well-being, particularly if their nature is well understood and emphasized. As recent history demonstrates, this is exactly what the theoretical, methodological and practical efforts of the past three decades have accomplished.

Second, many unpaid activities are not caring or fulfilling, while some paid activities are. The shift of a significant proportion of caring work from the unpaid reproductive sphere to the market has not always involved the loss of some of its basic characteristics. For example, work motives associated with



solidarity, altruism and caring can be found in the market as well as in unpaid work. So it is difficult to argue that there are no personal and relational aspects to some of the paid services offered through the market, despite the fact that the service is provided in exchange for pay. To be sure, some market-oriented caring services are unlikely to provide the same quality of care and emotional support as that offered by a loving family member — whether or not the caring work is based on love and affection, a sense of responsibility, respect, intrinsic enjoyment, altruism or informal *quid pro quo* expectations.<sup>10</sup> However, it is not difficult to find exceptions to both cases, i.e. market-based care providing selfless emotional support beyond the exchange contract, and family care based on selfish expectations or on some form of coercion.

Third, there is a dialectical relationship between market and non-market work such that, to some extent, the skills required in one sphere can be used in the other, and vice versa. It is therefore difficult to draw a clear dividing line between the two. Thus, a paid nanny or nurse may provide a high quality of personal care with skills learned at home; and managerial skills learned in the labour market may be used as a way to reduce unpaid working time in the household.

Fourth, in addition to caring labour, unpaid work includes other types of activity only indirectly related to caring, such as gathering wood, cleaning the house, and participating in community activities. The extent of these tasks may vary by country, cultural factors, and the social background of those performing them. In this sense, Himmelweit's argument has a built-in bias resulting from her focus on an urban nuclear family, and so does not include all forms of unpaid work.

Overall, however, Himmelweit makes important arguments which question the extent to which the selfless, caring work conventionally attributed to domestic labour can be projected on to other activities outside the household, including market activity, a subject which is discussed below.

### *Theoretically misguided*

The third objection to the project of measuring unpaid work relates to theoretical and methodological questions springing from conventional economics. Though criticisms have been voiced by conventional economists, very few have been expressed in writing.<sup>11</sup> The discussion that follows focuses on a paper by Sujai Shivakumar, *Valuing women's work: Theoretical constraints in determining the worth of household and other non-market activity* (Shivakumar, 1997), which is a pioneering effort and captures many of the unwritten criticisms referred to above.

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<sup>10</sup> For an analysis of caring motives, see Folbre and Weisskopf (1998).

<sup>11</sup> For example, some World Bank economists have been very critical of UNDP's efforts to include estimates of unpaid work in its *Human Development Report 1995*. However, to the author's knowledge, the objections have mostly been voiced in discussions and meetings, rather than in writing.

One of Shivakumar's objectives is to show that the monetary imputation of unpaid work "is not consistent with present conceptions of the theory of value in economics" and that this imputation is merely a "rhetorical effort" without theoretical foundation or a "dubious game of statistical football" (Shivakumar, 1997, p. 374). In order to elaborate this argument, he includes a historical account of the development of value theory in economics and formulates three main criticisms. First, he claims this attempt is inspired by socialist-feminism in terms of its rhetoric, forms of analysis and policy prescriptions, using gender as the central "tool of analysis", presenting alternative visions of economic processes and focusing economics on the notion of "provisioning of human life". Second, he argues that the attempt is based on Ricardian-Marxian notions of value based on the labour theory of value instead of the "modern" orthodox value theory based on subjective preferences and as indicated through market prices. For this reason, he views the attempt as theoretically unsound: "Modern economic theory does not support time-use analysis as a basis for imputing the monetary value of work ... The labour theory of value on which this type of analysis is based has roots in Ricardian-Marxian theory of value that is no longer recognized in economics" (Shivakumar, 1997, p. 333). In this sense, Shivakumar considers that the money value estimates, such as those included in the *Human Development Report 1995*, are meaningless because they are based on time-use data.

Third, Shivakumar criticizes the different methods used to estimate the value of unpaid work. In doing so, he repeats many of the methodological objections previously addressed by different authors. However, rather than pointing out the ways in which methodologies might be improved, he sees no redeeming value in the attempt to do it. Comparing the feminist efforts on unpaid work with those of the environmentalists who want environmental costs to be taken into consideration in national accounting statistics, he writes: "With no theoretical guideline on how to choose among alternative ways of conducting the valuation, the selection among alternative ways of imputation in environmental accounting then comes to reflect on the relative strengths of competing political interests" (Shivakumar, 1997, p. 405).

The estimates in the *Human Development Report 1995* did present many problems, but many of them derived from poor and insufficient data; a more constructive approach would view the data as the result of a pioneering but nevertheless important effort in need of improvement. Shivakumar also points out the problem of comparability between market and non-market time, but fails to mention that most advocates of the inclusion of unpaid work in national income accounts recognize this problem (hence the use of satellite accounts to avoid comparing like with unlike).

Shivakumar's critique is more fundamental in its insistence on the view that any monetary evaluation displays an ignorance of the concept of value as something realized through the exchange process. That is, the exchange process is viewed as the only source of value despite the fact that the value of non-market goods in subsistence production has been estimated for many years, and that many economists make use of "shadow prices" in their work. Moreover, a

good proportion of domestic work is marketable, particularly as increasing portions of it are taken up by paid work. This includes wage work such as cleaning services and childcare provided by firms of different sizes (Meagher, 1997). However, Shivakumar does not make any reference to these facts. Within neoclassical economics, the imputing of market prices to household production is standard practice. Shivakumar does not make any reference to the fact that, in many ways, the New Household Economics pioneered the application of “modern” human capital theory to household production and decision-making and that other economists have also taken the task of analysing household production seriously (e.g. Fraumeni, 1998). It would be ironic to categorize the work of human capital theorists such as Jacob Mincer, Gary Becker and many other neoclassical economists as socialist-feminist and based on the labour theory of value.

In associating the effort to measure unpaid work with Ricardo and Marx, Shivakumar ignores the fact that orthodox Marxist theory would agree with his insistence on seeing value as originating only in the exchange process. In addition, it is far from clear that Marxian value theory is based on labour inputs without regard to the weight of demand to determine market value. Though he is right in affirming that gender as an analytical category and “the provisioning of human life” are central to feminist economics, that holds true for feminist approaches to other disciplines. He ignores the fact that the work on measuring unpaid labour has been carried out by a large number of professional men and women, some of them feminists, supporting diverse theoretical paradigms and practical politics.

Beyond these basic points, some of Shivakumar’s criticisms are not well informed, for example, his statement that feminists “have not spelled out any particular policy prescription other than to seek to better inform policy makers” (1997, p. 394). Feminists have called for and suggested gender-aware policies in areas such as labour market policy, public services, structural adjustment packages, and agricultural policy (Sen and Grown, 1987; Palmer, 1991; Elson, 1995; UNDP, 1995), and many of these policies would benefit from more systematic statistical information and documentation regarding unpaid work. In sum, Shivakumar’s paper reveals a strong irritation about the spoiling of a neatly-defined, presumably “objective” orthodox economic model by what he regards as the normative prescriptions of feminism. Although, to his credit, he does present some recommendations “to satisfy the Beijing mandate”, his alternatives fall short of the task to be accomplished and do not solve some of the problems analysed.

## Concluding comments

The questions underlying this article are what is *value* and what is *of value to society*. The basic problem remains how to measure and evaluate human well-being and how to identify those who contribute to it. The point made has been that though current GNP statistics include what is bad for our health — such as carcinogenic chemicals in foods — or for the environment — such as

the pollution produced by factories — still there is resistance to the measuring of work and production of goods and services that sustain and enhance human well-being. Yet, in Nancy Folbre's terms, societies and individuals ultimately need to know "who pays for the kids" (Folbre, 1994).

It is necessary to know, for example, who contributes to the survival strategies of the poor so that the best policies to overcome poverty can be designed. Unpaid work is not evenly distributed across class and social groups. Affluent households can employ (mostly) women for domestic work, and can also purchase goods and services that poorer households have to produce at home, without outside help. When lower-income women participate in the paid labour market, either their workload increases or standards of home-produced goods and childcare are lowered (Gimenez, 1990). There is also a significant difference in the total number of hours dedicated to domestic work by women with different levels of income. An empirical study carried out in Barcelona showed that the absolute value of domestic work was higher for middle-income households, followed by the lower-income and higher-income categories. However, domestic work in lower-income households represented a higher percentage of total household income (which included social income or the perceived value of public services) (Carrasco, 1992).

But there is more to the challenge of measuring unpaid work since, in Elizabeth Minninch's terms, it requires "transforming knowledge" or moving beyond the boundaries of conventional paradigms. This includes rethinking "mystified concepts" or "ideas, notions, categories and the like, that are so deeply familiar they are rarely questioned" and which result in "partial knowledge" (see Minninch, 1990, chap. 4). The challenge is to question current methods to measure well-being and who contributes to it in the community and society as a whole. Which leads one in turn to question the assumptions underlying received knowledge, in this case those linking "work" to paid labour time and the market.

This article has shown how discussion about the difference between paid and unpaid work leads one to question how far the economic rationality attached to market-related behaviour is the norm and the extent to which models of human behaviour are based on motives most commonly associated with unpaid work, such as altruism, empathy, collective responsibility and solidarity. Feminist economists have emphasized the need to construct models other than those based on the market-oriented motives of rational economic man. In Paula England's terms, conventional economic theory is based on a "separate-self model" of male behaviour which is different from the "relational model" more commonly associated with female behaviour (England, 1993). This raises questions about whether, as women's participation in the paid labour force increases around the world, we may witness two changes: a "masculinization" of women's values and behaviour and a "feminization" of market-oriented behaviour.

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