

Citation for published version:

Ursula Huws, 'Eating us out of house and home: The dynamics of commodification and de-commodification of reproductive labour in the formation of virtual work', *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics*, Vol. 14 (1): March 2018.

DOI:

https://doi.org/10.1386/macp.14.1.111_7

Document Version:

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Eating us out of house and home: The dynamics of commodification and decommodification of reproductive labour in the formation of virtual work

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Introduction

It may be argued that the gender division of labour in the household is the most fundamental of all social divisions, playing its part in shaping all other divisions of labour whether these are hierarchical (who bosses whom around), technical (who uses what tools for which tasks), spatial (who does what work where), contractual (who is obliged to do what, how and for what reward) or cultural (the symbolic value of particular roles or tasks and the penalties for transgression).

Decades of feminist scholarship have given us ample evidence of the connections between the household division of labour between men and women and patterns of segregation in the labour market. Inextricably entangled with these patterns are other, cross-cutting divisions between paid and unpaid labour, divisions which, furthermore, are unstable, subject to shifts related not just to changing social relations, economic circumstances and cultural norms but also to the ways in which technologies are deployed. But the importance of the shifting boundaries between paid and unpaid work does not stop there. The dynamic processes whereby reproductive work is commodified and decommodified also mean that it becomes the basis of new forms of work which, while contributing to the further

development of capitalist economies, remain deeply gendered, extending and perpetuating existing gender divisions, while also contributing to the development of new inequalities.

This article begins by discussing some of these mutually reinforcing factors whereby the domestic division of labour shapes the public one. It then goes on to look at the dynamics of sectoral change resulting from commodification and decommodification. These include: the transformation of aspects of unpaid labour into paid labour, resulting in the development of new private and public service sectors; the development of new products that create the basis for new manufacturing industries that partially displace these service industries; the further development of new service industries relating to their production and distribution; and finally the emergence of new kinds of unpaid labour connected with the consumption of these new goods and services. It concludes by summarizing the complex interaction of social, economic and technological factors in shaping the new divisions of labour emerging from these rapidly changing developments, which, nonetheless, have gendered divisions at their origin. The article draws on a large body of past research by the author, which can be found summarized in two collections of essays, published in 2003 and 2014. If not otherwise referenced, these form the sources for all the material in the text that follows.

[How the gender division of labour in unpaid work shapes the gender division of labour in paid work](#)

The gender division of labour in the home shapes the gender division of labour outside the home in multiple ways.

One of these relates to the value placed on particular skills. The skills that women exercise unpaid in the home (e.g. cleaning, preparing food, care work) tend to have a low value on the labour market (because they have low scarcity). Thus women are not only more likely than men to be assigned these roles in the money economy, but these jobs are also likely to be paid less than those carried out by men. This has historically been associated with low levels of professionalization, organization and bargaining power for workers in these service occupations.

A second factor relates to the more limited availability of women with household responsibilities, both in terms of the amount of time available and its disposition. The timetables of domestic work restrict availability on the labour market both temporally and spatially. In a process of mutual adaptation, in most developed economies, this has led to the creation of part-time, proximate jobs designed to meet the needs of women who are on this short leash from their homes. On the one hand, women seek out jobs that it is possible to combine logistically with their reproductive responsibilities. On the other, employers, seeing that this offers a cheap way to fill them, design jobs so that they meet these needs. In some cases, this mutually reinforcing process extends not just to the design of shift patterns that mesh with the daily rhythms of family life, but also longer-term temporal rhythms created by the institutional requirements that shape social reproduction, for example offering 'term-time only' contracts to parents of school-age children. Needless to say, such jobs tend to offer low rewards and poor prospects for advancement. This means that men are more likely to fill jobs that require extended working hours or long-distance travel, jobs which are more likely to be well rewarded. It should be noted, however, that there are exceptions to these patterns. At the bottom end of the labour market, women

workers may be forced to override the needs of their families in order to obtain an income. Examples of this are migrant women who have to leave their own children behind and travel to another continent to carry out low-paid reproductive work for others (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2004), and office cleaners who have to make contingent arrangements in order to work night shifts. At the other extreme, relatively privileged women can enter the labour market on similar terms to men by paying others to carry out their reproductive work.

Other mutually reinforcing patterns have created expectations that career interruptions from childbirth and caring will lead to lower achievement by women, which in turn results in different normative models of educational and occupational choice for girl children. What is the point of expensively equipping a young woman with the skills for a high-flying job if she is going to give up work as soon as her first baby is on the way?

These historical patterns have shaped a reality in which women have been less, or differently, qualified than men which, in turn, has led to them being steered into different, generally lower-paid, occupations. The resulting formation of a large pool of undereducated women workers has also led to male workers treating them as a threat who will undercut their hard-won wages and conditions.

In sum, these patterns, in combination, have created a situation where there is a systematic segregation of women in the paid workforce along multiple dimensions including: occupation, sector, working hours, contractual status, pay and working conditions. These patterns are underpinned by deeply culturally embedded normative assumptions that, in an ideal world 'a woman's place is in the home'. And these norms, in turn, create sanctions

that serve to reinforce the boundaries between male and female spheres, both inside and outside the paid workforce.

The long-standing, and deeply embedded, nature of these patterns does not, of course, mean that they have remained unchanged. On the contrary, new technologies and innovations in work organization have brought many twists and turns, with each new development creating both opportunities and threats, for women, but also for men. Automation, for example, simplified some labour processes, resulting in women being substituted for skilled and well-organized male workers in some industries, with the change typically accompanied by lower wages and different shift patterns. Standardization of procedures associated with digitization in bureaucratic organizations, such as banks, resulted in women being recruited as managers at precisely the moment these managerial jobs were being deskilled and transformed from jobs that required exercising professional judgement to those that were effectively team leaders (Crompton and Jones 1984; Game and Pringle 1983). The development of call centres created new kinds of part-time work, in different locations from the face-to-face customer service jobs that they replaced. The combination of information and communications technologies that made it possible for digitizable work to be carried out remotely was seen as an opportunity to allow people (most likely to be women with domestic responsibilities) to work from home, creating a new kind of two-tier segmentation in information processing work.

Every twist in the division of labour has thus brought changes; but none of these changes seems yet to have posed a serious challenge to the underlying patterns of gender

segregation, even when introduced under a cloak of social innovation in a manner that is apparently progressive, emancipatory and unisex (Gill 2006).

How unpaid work forms the basis for new industrial sectors

Service sectors

Historically, probably the oldest example of the transformation of unpaid work into paid work is rooted in social inequality. Households with greater resources hire poorer people to come and work for them, for example as domestic servants or agricultural workers, thereby consolidating their relative wealth and, in the process, reinforcing the economic differences that made such arrangements possible in the first place. In various pre-capitalist societies they were institutionally buttressed by a formalization of social difference (for instance in seigneurial, manorial or caste systems). Although not involving a wage relation, slavery is another institutional form by which the labour of one social group is appropriated for the benefit of another. There have been significant differences, from one country or historical period to another, in the ways in which specific tasks have been assigned to women, or men, in these servant-like relationships, but it is difficult to find examples in which there were none. In general, the pattern of occupational segregation among servants is remarkably similar to that in households in which the same tasks are carried out without payment or overtly coercive relations of dominance (Huws 2012).

Ancient though it may be in its origins, this practice has by no means died out. Indeed, it shows every sign of having grown in the latter part of the twentieth and early twenty-first century, as economic pressures have pushed more and more women into the paid

workforce, creating a need for others to step in to take care of their reproductive work. Increasingly it is migrant women who make up this new cohort of low-paid domestic service workers whose labour enables other women to enter the formal labour market (Young 2001). However since the advent of capitalism, such private service work, supplied within the context of a direct master (or mistress)—servant relationship has been supplanted, or supplemented, by other forms of delivery, involving intermediate bodies.

In the twentieth century, partly as a result of campaigning by women's organizations and social democratic groups, partly as a result of a political consensus that demanded certain minimum standards of public health and education, some of these roles were taken on by the state, resulting in the creation of public sector jobs for the provision of such services as childcare, nursing, care of the sick and elderly, education and the maintenance of public spaces and infrastructure.

Since, at least, the nineteenth century, reproductive services have also been supplied by private companies such as laundries, suppliers of pre-cooked food and construction and maintenance contractors.

In both public and private services, this has involved the creation of formally designated jobs in the public sphere in which workers have been absorbed into employment relationships, with state bodies or with firms, that are visible and regulated. In both spheres too, similar gendered patterns of occupational segregation to those that pertain in more private domestic work can be observed, with women more likely to be doing cleaning, cooking and care work and men more likely to be doing heavy manual work.

In the twenty-first century, the changing relationship between these four domains - unpaid work, paid public sector work, paid private sector work and individualized paid service work – has become increasingly volatile, with a number of different trends simultaneously in play.

One factor has been the impact of public policy. Public sector cuts have, on the one hand, driven much work that used to be carried out by paid public sector workers back into the home and community, where it reverts to unpaid and voluntary work. On the other hand, they have led to an outsourcing of public sector work to private companies in an attempt to reduce costs and increase efficiencies. This has led to a growth in service work, much of it contingent and low paid, carried out by private sector companies, involving workers are varied as cleaners and nurses, security guards, garbage disposal operatives and call centre workers.

Meanwhile declining household incomes and the growth of single-earner households has led to increasing pressure on women to enter the labour market and work as many hours as possible. This in turn has created an additional need to purchase services they do not have the time to carry out for themselves, driving increased demand for individualized private services. In some cases, as already noted, these private services are carried out by individuals employed directly, sometimes informally, under arrangements whereby workers might carry out services such as cleaning, baby-sitting or dog-walking casually, for cash payments. There has, in other words, been a shuffling of activities between all four domains, with women's work (by which I mean the kinds of work predominantly done by women) disproportionately likely to be implicated in each case.

The shifts do not stop here, however. An important trend, that has reached critical mass since the 2007–08 financial crisis, has been the development of online platforms for organizing service work. This has been particularly important in the transformation of work organization (and hence control patterns and payment systems) among individualized service workers providing services directly to consumers in their homes or in public spaces. A range of workers whose status previously most resembled that of domestic servants or self-employed workers in the informal economy, ranging from baby-sitters to window-cleaners, from dog-walkers to gardeners, have been drawn within the orbit of international companies such as Taskrabbit, Helpling, Myhammer and Mybuilder. In the process, their work has been standardized and subjected to new kinds of market discipline, monitored online using standardized indicators (Huws 2017).

When tasks are booked via these online platforms (as when they are done by other formally constituted private or public service providers), the relationship between the worker and the client is changed, with formal standards and control methods replacing those that have been informally – perhaps tacitly – negotiated.

The development of online platforms is still at a relatively early stage but it seems likely that it will bring major transformations not only to the distribution of reproductive labour across the axes of paid/unpaid, public/private and individualized/corporate forms of organization but also to the quality of that work, both for the women and men who carry out this service work for money and for those who are recipients of these services (Huws 2016).

Manufacturing industries

The shift of service labour from the domestic sphere to public or private service providers is not the only way in which reproductive labour is implicated in major sectoral change.

Helped by technological change, another major historical trend is the substitution of goods for services. Thus the use of tailors is replaced by the purchase of ready-made clothes, laundries by washing machines, live music by mass-produced recordings and labour-intensive food preparation by the purchase of ready-cooked meals.

Each New Wave of technological development has been associated with a further development of this trend. For example in the early twentieth century the spread of electricity accompanied by an expansion in the development of domestic appliances such as refrigerators, vacuum cleaners and washing machines. Added to these, as the years went by, were other products such as hair dryers, toasters and microwave ovens. Developments in chemistry led to a wide array of cleaning products, from shampoo to toilet cleaner, as well as a range of plastics that made it possible to mass-produce extremely cheap and disposable versions of household products that had hitherto been available only to the better off.

The jobs created to manufacture these products are very different in kind, and in location, from the service jobs they indirectly displace. They also change in character over time as developments in automation enable tasks requiring a high degree of craft skill to be replaced by simpler, more standardized processes that can be carried out by lower-paid workers. Outsourcing enables work to be exported to lower-wage countries, resulting in attenuated value chains spanning the globe. The gender division of labour varies along these production chains, but it is rare to find any process where there are not some jobs that are

marked as typically male, and others as female, with segmentation taking place along multiple dimensions. Women may, for example, be concentrated in different parts of the production process (e.g. assembly or packing), in different locations (e.g. working from home, or sitting at machines on the shop floor while men operate the fork-lift trucks in the warehouse), on different shifts or on different types of contract from men. Because each wave of automation impacts a different group of workers, it is likely that it will differentially affect men and women.

Such production jobs may seem remote from the kinds of reproductive work carried out unpaid in the home. Yet their origins can be traced to the commodification of these household tasks and their progressive transformation from services to goods.

Unpaid consumption work

I turn finally to yet another tectonic shift in the dynamic displacement of reproductive labour. This time, in a kind of completion of the circle of production and consumption, the tasks carried out by paid workers are offloaded back onto consumers as unpaid labour.

One way of looking at this is to see it as the last leg of the production process, in which the value that has been created along the chain by networks of workers who may not even be aware of each other's existence is finally realized. The point at which the paid labour of the delivery worker and the unpaid labour of the consumer meet has always been fuzzy. Does the customer travel to market to collect the goods, or are they delivered to the home by a delivery worker? What is clear is that there is a strong historical trend for the companies that produce goods and services to transfer as much of this labour as possible onto the

customer in the interest of saving costs. Examples of this in the twentieth century, many of them aided by new technologies, include the introduction of self-service into supermarkets and canteens, the development of automatic cash machines and petrol pumps, passenger self-check-in at airports and flat-pack furniture for self-assembly. The development of the Internet vastly expanded the range of service activities that could be carried out by users: from booking holidays to filing tax returns. This has transformed labour processes, and greatly increased productivity, in former service industries such as banks, travel agents, retailing and public bureaucracies, but it has also added invisible extra hours to the consumer's unpaid working day.

The impact is not just a quantitative one – of adding additional minutes to the total time devoted to performing unpaid reproductive tasks. It is also qualitative, narrowing the scope for autonomy, for instance by requiring the tasks to be carried out during particular operating hours, and insisting that standard procedures are followed. The Taylorization and routinization of the labour processes of paid service workers are thus externalized and imposed onto unpaid workers, for example through the use of standardized scripts in call centres, and, online, requirements for pin numbers, passwords and the entry of data in particular, pre-specified formats.

The promise that new appliances will be labour saving or that self-service will avoid time spent in queues turns out to have a sting in the tail. What consumer capitalism offers with one hand, it takes with the other, leaving those responsible for reproductive labour little escape from the time squeeze imposed by the need to combine paid and unpaid labour. For those who can afford it, the solution to this problem is to pay others to do the work. It is

now possible, via online platforms, to pay somebody else to assemble your flat-pack furniture, collect your kids from school or even wait in a queue for you. Thus do the wheels of commodification keep turning. And thus are gender inequalities reproduced, even while the labour of reproduction is transformed.

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