

Work, Chores and War

A new point of view?

John Arden

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'Most women know that a basic element of housework is managing the tensions of and servicing in every other way those – women and men – who do waged work, school work, housework; they know that work in the home is precisely to ensure that work outside and life generally goes on uninterrupted.'

– from *The Global Kitchen*, edited by Selma James (Crossroads Books, 1995)

'The idea that the wage-value of housework, and of ostensibly non-productive low-waged women's labour, should be included in a nation's GNP, is one that would turn on its head the whole institutionalised vulgar-Marxist concept of the industrial proletariat in developed countries being the vanguard of the revolution . . . It [brings in] the South . . . the Third World, to determine its own future.'

– from 'Power to the Sisters', by Margaretta D'Arcy, essay included in *Awkward Corners* by J. Arden & M. D'Arcy (Methuen, 1988).

The world tends to think of war as essentially a masculine affair. 'The world'? – that is to say, very nearly everyone everywhere: we mean unreconstructed enthusiasts for war (a surprising number of macho combat-buffs continue to exist in all corners as large as life, even today); we mean deplorers of war who are nonetheless prepared to take part in it ('What else can we do, the vileness of our opponents leaves us no alternative?'); we mean out-and-out pacifists who regard the military man (note the word 'man') as an evolutionary aberration like the meat-eater; we mean feminists as well, with their pungent slogan 'Take the toys away from the boys!'; and, yes, let's not forget, the other sort of feminists who demand to enlist as front-line soldiers because they regard front-line soldiering as still very much of an exclusive male trade that needs to be broken-into if true equality between the sexes is ever to come to pass. There's an old old image, central to western culture, that never fails to engage the emotions, it dates all the way back to Homer's *Iliad*, the woman standing weeping while the man (whom she has just accoutred in all the

grimness of his war-gear), marches away, or rides away, or climbs onto a troop-train, or sails off aboard a warship, or flies off in a plane. Andromache cries farewell to Hector, Mrs Quickly pleads in vain to march with Ancient Pistol at least as far as Staines, Emma Hamilton snatches a last embrace from Nelson, Shirley Temple in *Fort Apache* stands and watches Henry Fonda lead his regiment out into ambush and destruction.

In other words, women in time of war have generally been shown either as passive, helpless, bereaved and violated victims, or as stoical heroines 'doing their bit at home' to keep the country going until the fathers, husbands, brothers, sons or sweethearts return from the battlefield. Two aspects of the same perception, and there has been a degree of truth in both of them. Both of them moreover are flattering to both sexes, which is why they have lasted through so many generations. Men like to be seen by artists, storytellers and journalists as courageous and responsible, fighting to protect their womenfolk. Women have often accepted their own portrayal as deeply-feeling heroines, their suffering and endurance all the more estimable for its lack of obvious glamour. These easy simplifications have long been proved effective as propaganda for the notion of the lamentable inevitability of war (i.e. propaganda *for* war, even though it may look like anti-war sentiment). And because they are such effective propaganda, they glibly avoid some uncomfortable but crucial truths.

For example . . . Wars on the whole are fought as a matter of business. They are fought for the seizure of resources, and they are fought for the benefit of an entire world-wide industry, the military/industrial complex, for which war or rumours of war are required at regular intervals to keep its investors and its skilled employees living in the style to which they have grown accustomed. Soldiers and arms-manufacturers are paid for their work, their income can be counted and valued and set against the expected profits of the operation, and it must be said that women nowadays do earn a good proportion of that income in all manner of work, agricultural/industrial/administrative/caring work, directly related to warfare. But then, at the same time, women in time of war are expected to 'do their bit at home' (whether they are in employment or not); they are expected to continue to be their courageous selves, to support, to encourage, to love, to look after refugees, to look after the wounded, the bombed-out, the dispossessed, the raped, the traumatised, to offer their children to the draft, to offer their homes to billeting-officers, to offer their saucepans and garden railings to be recycled into weaponry, to tell the interviewers from the propaganda-media that 'Our people can take it and will never surrender!' Or at least that's how it is when the battlefield is some distance away, as with Britain in World War Two.* The picture in the Soviet Union or Italy or France or Yugoslavia during that conflict was more hideously direct – and so it is today with the chaotic and

*It's almost as though we were writing about the essential contribution of football fans to the overall success of their team; they are no less reliable than are women in the war-effort, no less taken for granted, no less exploited by the faceless controllers who finally make the decisions. But if they stop coming to the matches, woe alas! what happens to the club?

exceptionally brutal wars that are erupting month after month in the countries of the Third World or the poorer areas of Europe or the Near East. In such cases women's work is not so much support for the soldiery as an unavoidable and agonised attempt to sustain human life *in despite of* the soldiery (their own side quite as often as the enemy) – an immediate horror of starvation, rape, genocide, torture and flight, sometimes they must themselves take up arms for their own defence and that of their families. They will never be paid nor compensated; and yet, without them, whether as victims or assistants or hostages or trophies of victory, the whole war-effort would collapse in unsustainable fatuity, ignorant armies scouring the burnt-out landscape in search of their right to dominate and control – whom? there'd be no society left to submit to their prowess.

For women are in fact the very pillars upon which war, as a profitable human activity, has been erected.

And when the war is over, and we stare in dismal amazement at a ruinous expanse of wasted life, a destroyed eco-system, a broken-down infrastructure and a population on the verge of terminal dementia, who but women will be called upon to organise the volunteer labour for the aid-convoys, the compassionate non-governmental organisations, the clearing-up and sanitising of the loathsome mess left in the wake of the armies and the far-from-smart bombs? Women for the Human Work, surely; and no wages to be asked or offered, because isn't it their vocation as humane human beings? And after them, in *their* wake (but prepared for it long before), come the well-remunerated organisers of the Profitable Work – the vast contracts for rebuilding flattened factories and city-centres – the restocking of the exhausted arsenals – the comprehensive research-projects to find out if next time the bombs really can be smart, if the radioactivity or chemical contamination-damage can perhaps be a little less *collateral* (or perhaps a little more), to best suit the delicate balance between realpolitik and voter-friendly PR – and all of them grabbing the banknotes hand-over-fist.

It is important to realise that women's unwaged work to keep war in business all over the globe is no more than an extension of women's unwaged work in every area of public and private life.

Let us look at a few statistics. They were presented as part of the discussion at the United Nations 3rd World Conference on Women at Nairobi in 1985, and were also invoked at the succeeding UN 4th World Conference on Women, at Beijing in 1995. So they are not quite up-to-date. But we may doubt if the situation has improved in recent years.

\$700 billion is spent annually on military budgets world-wide, while less than \$20 billion is spent on the essentials of life – accessible clean water, health, sanitation, basic education.

Women do two-thirds of the world's work for 5% of the world's income.

Women produce over half of the world's food.

Most women work a double day; housework and childcare on top of a waged job.

Married women in the waged workforce do 75% of household tasks.

Women provide more healthcare than all the health services in the world put together.

*Unwaged household work in the USA, **if counted**, would be 51.3% of the gross domestic product, and world-wide the yearly contribution of women's unwaged work has been assessed at at least \$11 trillion.*

We have emphasised a key phrase, *if counted*, for of course the unwaged work has never been counted and properly valued, it has only been guessed-at. But to date, as far as we know, the figures have not been challenged. (The United States value may in fact be much greater than 51.3% – it is unlikely to be less.)

Now what do we mean in this context by the word 'work'? We can say one thing about it: we do not mean what is generally regarded as *Real Work*. It includes, for a start, all the obvious household items – cooking, cleaning, looking after children, looking after sick members of the family – no-one would deny that such tasks do involve work in the general sense of the word, although as they are not supervised by a paid overseer and assessed at an hourly or weekly rate of pay, they tend to be thought of as 'chores', a different matter altogether in common understanding. 'Chores' are performed out of love, very often; or maybe out of a sense of duty; or even out of rage and resentment ('they treat me like a dog, so they do: but at least they can't say I don't keep their poxy house clean!'). They are also performed because of lack of choice, lack of money, lack of power. They are performed because in an economy inseparable from the highly competitive military/industrial complex, wages are driven down and benefits and welfare services intolerably cut. They are performed because women under such circumstances cannot attain financial independence from their men.

'Work', therefore, that is to say *Real Work*, with an employer (or customer, or client) in the offing, means activities carried out in order to earn a living, while 'chores' are merely the way we strive to attain, or to preserve, a decent condition of life. It is obvious that persons in an *indecent* condition, a deprived, starved, squalid, unwholesome state of body and mind, will not be able to earn a living with any degree of efficiency, and thus their condition will deteriorate even further – indeed to the point of death. In fact, many 'chores' do not so much keep people in a 'condition of life'; they simply keep them *alive*, and that's it. (By which token, two more statistics: in Africa, women and girls grow 80% of the food consumed there; and in Asia, many women and girls spend up to five hours a day gathering firewood.)

So 'chores' (although nobody pays for them) are the essential foundation of 'real work' in the economic structure of the world. 'Work' cannot be done unless 'chores' are also done. But the actual substantial difference between 'work' and 'chores' is often so small as to be utterly unnoticeable, particularly if we transpose a few job-descriptions from the 'work' sector of our lives. In a straw-poll of women carried out in 1995 in the West of Ireland by the Galway-based group, Women in Media & Entertainment, many respondents (who would

probably be described in the popular press as ‘ordinary housewives’) agreed that they regularly had to work as Stress Counsellors, Sex Therapists, Psychological/Physiological Welfare Consultants, Peacemakers, Planner/Managers, Accountants, Disciplinaries, Waitresses, Haulier/Chauffeurs, etc., etc., and in many cases all together at once.

In time of war all this will increase a hundredfold; double-jobbing becomes treble or quadruple-jobbing, and the ‘chores’ are extended to the limits of endurance. To take but one example, most relevant at the present time: women as refugees. Those who are able to escape with their children from the war-zones face a mountain of unwaged work to secure the right to asylum: there is no form of labour more calculated to grind down the spirit than the everlasting effort to overcome the indifference, the hostility, the deliberate obstructions of a negative-minded bureaucracy . . . In the United Kingdom (and now, by unhappy imitation, in Ireland) the Immigration and Asylum legislation is making it even more difficult for women to be recognised as refugees. Opposition to such cruel and demeaning legislation is, in our opinion, an immediate priority for any ‘peace and human rights movement’, quite as necessary as the more obvious opposition to nuclear bases and to the ghastly new jack-in-a-box reappearance of Reagan’s Star Wars.

We would go so far as to say that the extent of unwaged work imposed upon women in a country at war is so outrageous as to be in itself a war-crime, equivalent to such indictable atrocities as compelling them into forced-labour-camps or sexual ‘comfort-centres’ for the troops.

Now it will be seen that very many of what we call ‘chore-occupations’ are related to the upbringing of children. It is arguable that childbirth itself is a ‘chore’, willingly or unwillingly embarked upon by the mother, and undeniably hard work. Yet so far is it from being regarded as Real Work that women have to struggle for the right to give birth without loss of their paid employment. ‘You can’t work and bear children’, they have regularly been told by old-fashioned bosses; the very choice of words implies an absolute contradiction. ‘You cannot do my work and yours at the same time,’ would be a more accurate way of putting it. And if it were to be put that way, do we not see the question that is begged?

For how can we say that bearing and rearing children is only the mother’s work, and nothing to do with the benefit of employers, or the benefit of the ‘economy’ in general?

Trade and industry must be assured of a continuous supply of people to work for their pay to keep it all going. And so must war, where people get killed, and regular renewal of the ‘degraded’ population is as important as the re-establishment of a bank or the rebuilding of a town. And if the unpaid work of producing those people (politely, giving birth to them) and conditioning them for adulthood (politely, looking after their health, instilling their first notions of discipline, educating them in pre-school social arts and morality) were to be paid for at the going rate for the various skills and activities involved, the existing

financial system would be turned upside down, not only the capitalist global market but also the various 'socialist' alternatives currently on theoretical offer.* And then how could any government afford to go to war?

The enormous disproportion of expenditure already noted would be resolved: no longer a mere \$20 billion devoted to 'essentials of life' as opposed to £700 billion earmarked for the military/industrial complex. And whereas at present the essentials-of-life expenditure is constantly and routinely held back, and wherever possible reduced, in deference to the arms budgeteers, the reverse would have to take place. Society would be compelled totally to reassess its priorities.

Now we are not so stupid as to argue that payment of wages for unwaged work would be the utopian panacea for all the ills of the planet. Not only women's work, we hasten to add: a great deal of unwaged work is also done by men, although they tend not to be aware of it, and that work too cries out to be counted and valued. (Examples: small-scale agriculture, 'gardening', providing food for the family; coping with illness/stress while in the waged workplace; self-defence against racism; homophobia or disability discrimination; travelling long hours back and forth from the paid job; coping with the neurosis of unsocial hours of work or arbitrary flexi-hours, etc.)

Nor do we believe that the payment of such wages would of itself bring an end to the institutionalised mass-murder which Clausewitz described as 'the extension of politics by other means' (which might also be called 'the extension of multi-national big business by other means'). But it would go some way towards ensuring that the 'replacement of *warfare* by other means' might find a beginning. Of course, once the demand for such an unprecedented measure was thoroughly understood by the occult multi-national capitalism that aspires to buy up the world, it would be strongly opposed, just as all the varieties of socialism were opposed from the days of the French Revolution onward. But (despite a succession of most staggering setbacks) a yearning for the principles of socialism, or at least social justice, combined with an awareness of the deadliness of capitalism and of the increasing horror of resource-wars-disguised-as-nationalistic-self-assertions, is still alive in the minds of millions; a few months ago in Seattle this was wonderfully demonstrated. Is it possible to convert those yearnings, that awareness, into a serious world-wide campaign for the Value of Unwaged Work?

In fact, yes. It has already begun: the foundations of the transformation are firmly established, most appropriately in the context of the United Nations. At

*Socialists, by and large, have never really noticed this huge question of women's unwaged work; or if they have noticed it, they have dismissed it as sectarian or irrelevant until the revolutionary reconstruction of Real Work can take place. One reason often given is the alleged impossibility of *organising* women and their unwaged work. Which is actually a cop-out, a cover-up for a nervous failure to undertake a conscientious analysis. A second reason, not admitted to: most socialist programmes do not embrace a complete understanding of that crucial concept, Production. Their advocates simply cannot see how the birth and rearing of children is as much a form of Production as the manufacture of motor-cars or the harvesting of rice.

Beijing in 1995, at the UN 4th World Conference on Women, the government representatives of the nations of the earth agreed (after intense lobbying by dedicated women's groups from all parts of the world, led by the International Wages for Housework organisation and its associated International Women Count Network) to introduce in their respective countries a process of Measuring and Valuing Unpaid Work with the eventual aim of achieving a fair system of remuneration.

An agreement of this sort is no promise of immediate action. Its implementation can be indefinitely deferred. And all manner of political tricks can always be played to distort the implementation. But if the issue is sufficiently publicised, governments may well be kept up to the mark by popular pressure. Some progress has already been made. Measuring and Valuing has been at least prepared-for, and in some cases actually undertaken, by Canada, China, Japan, New Zealand, the Philippines, Switzerland, Trinidad & Tobago, the United States, the European Union (overall), and (separately in the European Union) Ireland, Spain and the United Kingdom. So clearly the next important stage of the movement is to ensure that when the all-important count has been made, some effective method of payment will take place. Here indeed is a task for 'popular pressure'. Theoretical collection and collation of statistics is one thing, hard cash is quite another.

'If the issue is sufficiently publicised.' Which will not be easy. For who knows about the issue? The decisions of Beijing, simply because they were the decisions of a conference *on Women*, and at the time significantly opposed by the United States/European Union bloc, were sidelined in the international media and in the list of politicians' priorities. There has been a baffled and resentful silence on the matter, not only from conventional political parties, but also from academic feminists, together with a number of uninformed attacks: payment for unwaged work routinely sneered-at as a reactionary device to keep women in the home instead of allowing them to liberate themselves with waged work. The crucial circumstance of women 'working a double day' (see above) has been either ignored or misunderstood. And yet, if the question is put to women in the street, the most common response is a fervent, 'Oh yes! Oh, that's it, yes of course!'

And because of that response, upon the 8th of March of the current year (International Women's Day, 2000) something happened, momentous, which has never happened before, and which will certainly happen again, year after year – until not only the principle, but also the practice, of Payment for Unwaged Work becomes an automatic part of fiscal policy all over the world.

A call for *all women to go on strike* on the 8th of March arose from the National Women's Council of Ireland and then was extended globally, once again by the Wages for Housework Campaign and the International Women Count Network: the main focus of the strike was to *make visible* the difference between what women give and what they get back in return. The Women's Global Strike was taken up, in one form or another, with greater or less visibility,

in more than 50 countries from every quarter of the world, from Albania to Australia, from Switzerland to Senegal. Once individuals have become involved in such a manifestation, they do not forget it; the experience is thereafter an integral part of their lives; its augmenting repetition will soon be second nature. Values and priorities will have been changed for ever.

Now, in all the material we have seen regarding the proposed Conference on Peace and Human Rights, there is not a single mention of any of the above. We do find a most necessary reference to the 'widening gap between rich and poor countries and between rich and poor within countries'. But no analysis is suggested of the exact nature of the poverty, of how much the impoverished workers are working for meagre wages and how far they are working for no wages at all. There is also a note by Mr Odd Andreassen, a Norwegian trade unionist, recommending 'links with trade unions, women's movement, ecological movement, etc.' to build an effective international peace and human rights network. But the abstraction 'women's movement' is just slotted into a list as though there would be nothing very exceptional about its contribution to discussion or action.

And yet, and yet . . . What has been said at a Forum of the United Nations has infallibly been said. It is on the record loud and clear. Commitments willy-nilly have been given. And a whole new point of view about the organisation of the world and its people and its business, and the way its wars are waged upon the backs of half the human race, has been publicly laid out for consideration and action. We suggest that the Beijing decision, as followed-up by the Women's Global Strike, is potentially the most important innovation in international affairs since – well, certainly since the fall of the Berlin Wall, and if properly handled its consequences should be far more benign than the consequences of that notorious missed opportunity. At all events, it is ground for hope: let's build on it.