

Depletion: The Costs of Unpaid Domestic Work

Written by Shirin M. Rai, Catherine Hoskyns and Dania Thomas

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SHIRIN M. RAI, CATHERINE HOSKYNs AND DANIA THOMAS, MAR 19 2012

How is it possible to know if the non-recognition of the value of domestic work undermines the possibilities for achieving gender justice? Much work has been done on the uncounted contribution of this kind of work – conceptualised by feminist political economists as social reproduction (SR)— to national economies, what its components are, how it should be analysed and how it fits within the global system (Edholm et.al., 1978; Mackintosh, 1981; Picchio 1992; Elson 1998; Bakker 2007). Methodologies, such as time-use surveys and modelling have been used to estimate the value of unpaid work (Hiraway, 2011, Esquivell, 2011, Fontana, 2007, van Staveren, 2011). Although Diane Elson has pointed out that “If too much pressure is put upon the domestic sector to provide unpaid care work to make up for deficiencies elsewhere, the result may be a depletion of human capabilities, ... the domestic sector needs adequate inputs from all other sectors. It cannot be treated as a bottomless well, able to provide the care needed regardless of the resources it gets from the other sectors” (2000:28), she writes this in the context of the economic crisis rather than the systemic nature of capitalism. In order to render the phenomenon visible and to conceptualise it, we have addressed the problem of ‘depletion’ — or, more specifically, depletion through social reproduction (DSR). DSR occurs (albeit at different rates and levels in different social contexts) when the gap between the outflows —domestic, affective and reproductive labour — and the inflows — medical care, income earned and leisure time — falls below a threshold of biological, financial and affective sustainability.

The Framework: Definitions — For the purposes of our work, we define SR as comprising: 1) biological reproduction (including reproducing labour), which carries with it the provision of the sexual, emotional and affective services that are required to maintain familial and intimate relationships; 2) unpaid production in the home of both goods and services, including different forms of care, as well as social provisioning and voluntary work directed at meeting needs in the community; 3) Reproduction of culture and ideology which stabilises (and sometimes challenges) dominant social relations. (Hoskyns and Rai 2007:300).

DSR is defined as $DSR = R_t < TH$, where R_t is the current stock of resources denoted by $(x_t - y_t) + R_{t-1}$ where $t = 1, 2, 3, \dots$, y_t denotes the resource outflows used up in the provision of SR and x_t as resource inflows. This difference represents the net outflow of current stock R_t . R_t is sensitive to the existing stock of resources which is denoted by R_{t-1} and also to the outflows expended towards offsetting normal wear and tear. When R_t deteriorates or falls below a threshold (TH) of sustainability over time, DSR occurs. The tipping point or threshold at which DSR can be measured will vary in the three sites. For example, for an individual the TH could be specified at the point at which his or her stock of health deteriorates or falls below the commonly accepted measure of a minimum standard of physical and mental health as evidenced by variables such as blood pressure and other stress indicators. Similarly, a TH can be specified to measure DSR in households and communities. For example, the death of an income earner could be a tipping point for a household if the loss drastically curtails the leisure time of other members.

Sites of DSR: We identify three sites where DSR takes place: as individuals, households and communities. The DSR of the *individual* can be physical as well as mental and might be measured through a number of different variables such as the Body Mass Index (BMI), tiredness, sleeplessness, reduced self-worth, insufficient time for oneself, the enjoyment friendships, and participation in community life. All these factors can, if they fall below the threshold of normal wear and tear, deteriorate the well-being outcomes, and reduce the capability of the individual to carry out SR in the long run. DSR of *households* could include the reduction in collective household resources such as leisure time spent together by members of the household as a result of extended working days, failure to manage

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the consequences of an increase in the number of household members engaged in wage labour and reduced support structures, less disposable income to carry out essential repairs to the fabric of the house etc. The household can benefit to different degrees from the resources of individuals that constitute it but can also exacerbate individual DSR. The DSR of *communities* that we identify would include the shrinking of community commons — resources, spaces, time commitments from those mobilised into paid work — leading to the non-use rather than the extensive or irresponsible use of community networks. The DSR of communities or a reduction in the resources required for social exchange can exacerbate the extent and effects of individual and household DSR. Similarly, the vibrancy of communities can mitigate them.

Harm and DSR: Despite consensual social relations, DSR can lead to harm. This harm can occur in the following ways. First, as *'discursive harm'*, that is negating work in the domestic sector, while through this negation affirming gendered social hierarchies and distinctions of class and race. Second, we can study harm as *'emotional harm'*, for example in the guilt associated with being a 'working mother', which condemns millions to believing they are harming their children's present and future (Harris, 2010). Third, harm as the *(non)recognition* of the working body within the home. Finally, we can examine the concept of harm as linked to the issues of *lack of access to formal modes of justice* such as citizenship entitlements. Harm occurs when groups are labelled 'non-contributors' to the economy and therefore depicted as welfare recipients rather than citizens with entitlements (Morris, 2010).

Reversing DSR: While systemic, DSR is reversible. We identify three strategies for reversing DSR, which we conceptualise as mitigation, replenishment and transformation. *Mitigation* occurs when individuals attempt to lessen the consequences of DSR by, for example, paying for help or sharing tasks across genders or by communal and collective arrangements among networks of friends and neighbours. This exposes differences in the effects of DSR not only internationally between the North and South, but also between different classes, races and regions within particular national contexts. *Replenishment* includes interventions by the state, voluntary associations and other non-state actors which help households cope with DSR without addressing its structural causes. *Transformation*, involves structural changes in two dimensions. The first is the restructuring of gendered social relations. The second is the issue of the recognition and valuation of SR and therefore of DSR. These three strategies are of course not fixed and the boundaries between them remain fluid. In some ways mitigation and replenishment, while hugely important, could be seen as taking the edge off the crisis of DSR.

Our approach has therefore made a distinction between mitigatory (individual), replenishing (state/private) and transformative strategies to address DSR. By making this distinction we suggest that while the structural barriers to including social reproductive work within the production boundary continue to exist, we need to be vigilant in the context of the crisis of capitalism that addressing DSR does not lead to the privatisation of risk. Mitigatory strategies at one end could lead to the increase in DSR down the care chain. Our research on DSR shows that the maintenance and extension of social protection provided by the state (replenishment strategy in our schema) is important to struggle for; the defence of social protection then becomes an urgent task in times of crisis. Delivering justice then, remains tied to both – the transformation of gendered social relations and to addressing the unequal distribution of resources in capitalist regimes of accumulation, production and exchange. In this context, the recognition, measurement and compensation of SR and DSR remain critical issues for gender equality.

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