

LRR FOCUS: Work Unpaid, Voices Unheard

There are countless ways that prevailing economic theory dismisses and ignores the economic contributions of women. The labor movement's focus on paid work as the main arena for union struggle often makes "women's work" marginal. There is a connection between the lower wages received for "women's jobs" and the fact that women often do similar work at home for no wages. Any strategy for the labor movement to tackle organizing women workers in the global economy needs to recognize the multiple economic positions that we, as women, hold at work and at home.

Unions have made some strides toward addressing the unique needs of women workers. Unions have worked to ensure that women are not required to do traditional unpaid tasks, such as bringing coffee, picking up dry cleaning, and running household errands as part of their paid work. We only need to look to areas of traditional women's work, such as nursing, clerical work, and teaching to see that unions have also fought for adequate compensation for a variety of "feminine" skills.

Unions also have room to improve. When we think about work, we commonly accept the notion that jobs can be described by the degree of physical and intellectual labor involved. But, we ignore the value of emotional labor. As Arlie Hochschild has pointed out, we all notice when emotional labor is not being done – when the flight attendant is not smiling, when the waitress is grumpy, when the teacher doesn't really care. And those of us who have done emotional work know that it is as hard as physical or intellectual labor. However, the contribution of emotional work is not recognized and therefore not valued.

To understand just how and why women's economic contributions are overlooked, we need to look to prevailing economic theory that is based on the price of goods and services on the "open market." This theory does little to explain why certain goods and services are worth more than others. But when we begin to question the value attached to certain forms of work we find that the domains of work traditionally filled by women are not valued and often not even recognized as work.

The effect of this economic theory is that all over the world women are given primary responsibility for our families and social relationships, but no official recognition for this largely unpaid form of work. Raising a family counts for nothing in national measures of wealth, such as gross domestic product. Further, the value of our paid work reflects the fact that emotional labor is not recognized. Thus, much of our work does not count and our voices are not heard. It is the responsibility and struggle of leaders in the labor movement to make sure that our voices are heard and our contributions do count. ■