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Global Householding: the Good, the Bad, and the Uncomfortable

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V. SPIKE PETERSON, MAR 30 2010

Households are an enduring feature of human history. They are the building blocks of social formations in every era and at all scales: from small communities to the global economy. Like families, they “order” social relations in particular ways. But households differ from families by allowing for non-kinship members and not presuming shared group residence. The emphasis lies rather in the pooling of diverse (material and non-material) resources with the purpose of ensuring the continuity of the collective unit.¹ Michael Douglass (2006, 423) deploys the term “*householding*” to underscore how “creating and sustaining a household is a continuous process of social reproduction that covers all life-cycle stages and extends beyond the family.” *Global householding* references the many ways in which these processes increasingly occur across national boundaries, for example, through transborder marriages, overseas education, labor migration and war displacements.² The psychological, socio-cultural, economic and political implications of these processes are extraordinarily complex and arguably involve as much as one-quarter of the world’s population.³ Scholars have hardly begun to map this vast terrain, which is especially marked by structural hierarchies of gender, sexuality, ethnicity/race, class and national location.

Feminists (and some world systems analysts) have produced an extensive body of research on households. But like domestic labor within households, this work rarely appears in mainstream accounts of economics, politics, or international relations (IR). These fields of inquiry tend to rely on foundational dichotomies—of public-private, paid-unpaid, productive-reproductive, and formal-informal—that marginalize the study of households and activities within them. For most of history, household activities constituting social reproduction were typically unpaid (not commodified) and stereotypically *feminized* (assigned to women and economically devalued).

In recent decades, neoliberal restructuring and marketization have deepened the commodification of the life world, drawing ‘private’ activities ever further into global circuits of capital accumulation. Infants, human organs, sexualized bodies, intimate services and care of dependents are all for sale—with good, bad and uncomfortable implications. Globalization has also restructured production processes and labor markets, with increasing percentages of women (stereotyped as cheap and reliable workers) generating income in, near and far from home. In important respects, flexibilization processes favored by neoliberal restructuring constitute a systemic *feminization of employment*, understand as simultaneously an embodied transformation of work practices (more women engaged in formal and informal income generation), a conceptual characterization of devalorized labor conditions (more precarious and poorly paid jobs), and a reconfiguration of worker identities (more feminized management styles and more female breadwinners).⁴ In multiple ways, this feminization of work affects social reproduction and gendered divisions of labor within and outside of households—with good, bad and uncomfortable implications.

‘*Social reproduction*’ refers to the array of activities that are sited primarily in households and are necessary for ensuring daily and generational continuity of families and communities. Conventional accounts assume hetero-patriarchal households as the norm, though this oversimplifies historical patterns and is increasingly belied by actual arrangements. While actual conditions of social reproduction vary, most of the *work* involved is unpaid, assigned to women, and situated “invisibly” within households. Feminist scholars and activists argue that this ‘hidden’ work matters economically, politically and analytically. *Economically*, it not only ensures household survival but also produces intangible social assets and significantly shapes the quality and quantity of labor, goods and services

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available beyond the household (through production, consumption, savings, and intergenerational transmission of assets). Households matter *politically* because they are the primary site of biological reproduction and they 'produce' societal members who are able to function 'appropriately' as citizens, workers and soldiers. Households matter *analytically* in terms of categories and codes they institutionalize. On one hand, these codes are often contradicted in practice. For example, binary constructions of work—as reproductive *or* productive, unpaid *or* paid, done for love *or* money—misrepresent the variable mix of caring and commodification that typifies “work” both inside and outside of households. And households are not always private, safe, or sites where love (not power or profit-seeking) prevails.

On the other hand, primary socialization in households has *systemic* effects. Most importantly, (hetero-patriarchal) practices of social reproduction institutionalize gendered divisions of labor that normalize the economic devalorization of feminized work—as ‘merely reproductive,’ natural, unlearned, unskilled, voluntary. Pervasive gender coding extends this devalorization beyond households to generate lower status and pay for such work (e.g., services, maintenance), whether it is done by women or men (e.g., minorities, migrants). In this sense, the gender politics of social reproduction operate beyond households to perpetuate economic and other inequalities that are materially constituted and culturally normalized by devaluing that which is feminized (not only women or all women). Households secure (material) resources in support of social reproduction through various combinations of cash income, subsistence, informal activities, petty trading, transfer payments, and welfare provisioning by community and/or publicly funded programs. These culturally varying processes shape and are shaped by divisions of labor and authority (within and outside of households); differential valorization of (gendered) ‘skill’ and ‘work’ assignments; patterns of labor mobility intra- and internationally; household strategies concerning production, consumption and accumulation; and structural articulation of households with markets and states. Households are thus ‘foundations’ of socio-economic systems and crucial sites for analyzing continuity—and change—in social orders.

Critics observe that neoliberal restructuring constitutes a deterioration in economic conditions and alteration of options for most households worldwide, as the reduction of men’s earning capacity, decline in the “real value” of wages, and feminization of employment interact. At the same time, neoliberal policies that promote deregulation, flexibilization and lower tax rates worsen the decline in resources devoted to welfare provisioning—just when the “need” for public support is growing. These entwined developments reveal tensions between state capacities and policies, patterns of capital accumulation, and the viability of households as basic socio-economic units. When households face reduced earnings and/or diminished public support, pressure increases primarily on women—due to gender coding—to ensure household survival or sustain household income levels. Feminists refer to *acrisis of social reproduction* as women struggle to “fill the gap” between an amplification of needs (emotional, physical, economic) and a reduction of monetized income, social services and/or welfare transfers.⁵ The current economic downturn compounds these dynamics and suggests the urgency of generating more systemic analyses of state-market-household linkages.

Problematic developments are illuminated when we look at the transnational care economy and the global householding it entails.⁶ Women now constitute approximately one-half of those migrating internationally, increasingly as the primary (household) income earner, and most of them are migrating for (gender coded) domestic and care-giving jobs. The global feminization of ‘work’ is visible here as women leave deteriorating economic (and other) conditions in the global South to seek more lucrative work in the global North where a “care deficit” exists; the latter is an effect of increasing needs for (privatized) domestic labor, care-giving and health services (as more women enter the paid labor force and ageing populations entail more medical attention and long-term care), at the same time as states reduce public spending in support of social services (healthcare, childcare, eldercare) and most men avoid increasing their contribution to domestic or care-giving labor.

In addition to familial and other dislocations associated with the migration of domestic workers, the care drain of medical workers compounds the brain drain that already inhibits Southern development. Receiving countries improve healthcare delivery and at minimal expense: they are not paying the costs of training (which are borne by sending states) and insofar as migrant workers have less bargaining power than citizens they will accept lower wages. While individuals and families in receiving countries are able to access much-needed and valued care of the ill and elderly, this represents a loss of access and care for “others.” Not only is healthcare provision depleted where it is comparatively most needed, but there are additional costs as those who provide care far away from their own homes

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may suffer from isolation, cultural pressures or parenting guilt; and the effects on children can be debilitating in the North as well as the South.

The global care economy thus exemplifies the good (new opportunities and freedoms for many women), the bad (draining care resources from the global South), and the uncomfortable (commodifying care and altering family relations) implications of global householding. But it is only one example of how households are undergoing transformation: women are estimated to head one-quarter of households in some countries and movements for same-sex marriage are gaining momentum, while labor migrations, overseas education, transborder marriages and war displacements are increasing the number of “trans-national” households with new gender and citizenship complexities. In sum, these points reveal how households, markets and states are linked and operate within a global frame; they also expose the centrality of “the private”—sexual relations, gender identities, family/household activities—to contemporary changes and *crises* at the global level. I conclude that households are important sites of power-shaping and shaped by the power of states and the global economy—and warrant much closer and more critical attention.

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¹ This account combines points in Smith and Wallerstein 1992; Dunaway 2001; Douglass 2006.

² See 'global householding' articles in *IDPR* 2006 and *Politics & Gender*, forthcoming.

³ "If a reasonable assumption is made that for every migrant there are 3-8 other non-migrant household members, then the current [2005 estimate of 200 million] numbers of international migrants would suggest that as many as 1.5 billion people—nearly one-quarter of the world's population—are directly engaged in global householding" (Douglass 2006, 424).

⁴ The "feminization" of economic restructuring has been widely noted and researched, e.g., Standing 1999; Peterson 2003; Berik et al 2009.

⁵ See Bakker and Gills 2003; Hoskyns and Rai 2007; Bakker and Silvey 2008; Beneria 2008.

⁶ See Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002; Parrenas 2001, 2008; Kingma 2006; Zimmerman et al 2006; Bakker and Silvey 2008; Beneria 2008; Peterson and Runyan 2010.