

Marxist and Socialist Feminisms

Although possible, distinguishing between Marxist and socialist feminist thinking is quite difficult. The differences between these two schools of thought seem more a matter of emphasis than of substance. Classical Marxist feminists work within the conceptual terrain laid out by Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, Vladimir Lenin, and other nineteenth-century thinkers. They regard classism rather than sexism as the fundamental cause of women's oppression. In contrast, socialist feminists are not certain that classism is women's worst or only enemy. They write in view of the Soviet Union's twentieth-century failure to achieve socialism's ultimate goal—namely, the replacement of class oppression and antagonism with “an association, in which the free development of each is the condition for the free development of all.”¹ Post-1917 communism in the Soviet Union and later in the Eastern Bloc was not true socialism but simply a new form of human oppression. Women's entry into the productive workplace did not make them men's equals either there or at home. For these and related reasons, socialist feminists moved beyond relying on class as the sole category for understanding women's subordination to men. Increasingly, they have tried “to understand women's subordination in a coherent and systematic way that integrates class and sex, as well as other aspects of identity such as race/ethnicity or sexual orientation.”²

Some Traditional Marxist Concepts and Theories

To appreciate the differences between classical Marxist and contemporary socialist feminism, we need to understand the Marxist concept of human

nature. As noted in Chapter 1, liberals believe that several characteristics distinguish human beings from other animals: a set of abilities, such as the capacity for rationality and the use of language; a set of practices, such as religion, art, and science; and a set of attitude and behavior patterns, such as competitiveness and the tendency to put oneself over others. Marxists reject the liberal conception of human nature, claiming instead that our ability to produce our means of subsistence makes us different from other animals. We are what we are because of what we do—specifically, what we do to meet our basic needs through productive activities such as fishing, farming, and building. Unlike bees, beavers, and ants, whose activities are governed by instinct and which cannot willfully change themselves, we create ourselves in the process of intentionally transforming and manipulating nature.³

For the liberal, the ideas, thoughts, and values of individuals account for change over time. For the Marxist, material forces—the production and reproduction of social life—are the prime movers in history. In laying out a full explanation of how change takes place over time, an explanation usually termed “historical materialism,” Marx stated, “The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political, and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.”⁴ In other words, Marx believed a society’s total mode of production—that is, its forces of production (the raw materials, tools, and workers that actually produce goods) plus its relations of production (the ways in which production is organized)—generates a superstructure (a layer of legal, political, and social ideas) that in turn reinforces the mode of production. Adding to Marx’s point, Richard Schmitt later emphasized that we should read the statement “human beings create themselves” not as “men and women, as *individuals*, make themselves what they are” but instead as “men and women, through production *collectively*, create a society that, in turn, shapes them.”⁵ So, for example, people in the United States think in certain ways about liberty, equality, and freedom because their mode of production is capitalist.

Like Marxists in general, Marxist and socialist feminists claim that social existence determines consciousness. For them, the observation that “women’s work is never done” is more than an aphorism; it is a description of the nature of women’s work. Always on call, women form a conception of themselves they would not have if their roles in the family and the workplace did not keep them socially and economically subordinate to men. Thus, Marxist and socialist feminists believe we need to analyze the links between women’s work status and women’s self-image to understand the unique character of women’s oppression.⁶

The Marxist Theory of Economics

To the degree Marxist and socialist feminists believe women’s work shapes their thoughts and thus “female nature,” these thinkers also believe capitalism is a system of power as well as exchange relations. When viewed as a system of exchange relations, capitalism is described as a commodity or market society in which everything, including one’s own labor power, has a price, and all transactions are fundamentally exchange transactions. But when viewed instead as a system of power relations, capitalism is described as a society in which every kind of transactional relation is fundamentally exploitative. Thus, depending on one’s emphasis, the worker-employer relationship is either an exchange relationship in which items of equivalent value are freely traded—labor for wages—or as a workplace struggle in which the employer, who has superior power, takes advantage of workers in any number of ways.

Whereas liberals view capitalism as a system of voluntary exchange relations, Marxists and socialists view it as a system of exploitative power relations. According to Marx, we determine the value of any commodity based on the amount of labor, or actual expenditure of human energy and intelligence, necessary to produce it.⁷ To be more precise, the value of any commodity equals the direct labor incorporated into the commodity by workers, plus the indirect labor stored in workers’ artificial appendages—the tools and machines made by the direct labor of their predecessors.⁸ Because all commodities are worth exactly the labor necessary to produce them, and because workers’ labor power (capacity for work) is a commodity that can be bought and sold, the value of workers’ labor power is exactly the cost of whatever it takes (food, clothing, shelter) to maintain them throughout the workday. But there is a difference between what employers pay workers for their mere capacity to work (labor power) and the value that workers actually create when they put their work capacity to use in producing commodities.⁹ Marx termed this difference “surplus value,” and from it employers derive their profits. Thus, capitalism is an exploitative system because employers pay workers only for their labor power and not for the human energy they expend and the intelligence they transfer into the commodities they produce.¹⁰

At this point in an analysis of Marxist economic thought, it seems reasonable to ask how employers get workers to labor for more hours than are necessary to produce the value of their subsistence, especially when workers received no compensation for this extra work. As Marx explained in *Capital*, the answer is simple: employers have a monopoly on the means of production, including factories, tools, land, and modes of transportation and

communication. Workers must choose between being exploited and having no work at all. It is a liberal fiction that workers freely sign mutually beneficial contractual agreements with their employers. Capitalism is just as much a system of power relations as it is one of exchange relations. Workers are free to contract with employers only in the sense that employers do not hold a gun to their heads when they sign on the dotted line.

Interestingly, employers can exploit workers under capitalism for another, less discussed reason. According to Marx, capitalist ideologies lead workers and employers to focus on capitalism's surface structure of exchange relations.¹¹ By means of this ideological ploy, which Marx called the "fetishism of commodities," workers gradually convince themselves that even though their money is very hard earned, there is nothing inherently wrong with the specific exchange relationships into which they have entered, because life, in all its dimensions, is simply one colossal system of exchange relations.

That liberal ideologies, typically spawned in capitalist economies, present practices such as prostitution and surrogate motherhood as contractual exercises of free choice is thus no accident, according to Marxist and socialist feminists. The liberal ideologies claim that women become prostitutes and surrogate mothers because they prefer this work over other available jobs. But, as Marxist and socialist feminists see it, when a woman, especially if she is poor, illiterate, and unskilled, chooses to sell her sexual or reproductive capacities, chances are her choice is more coerced than free. After all, if one has little else of value to sell besides one's body, one's leverage in the marketplace is quite limited.

The Marxist Theory of Society

Like the Marxist analysis of power, the Marxist analysis of class has provided both Marxist and socialist feminists with some of the conceptual tools necessary to understand women's oppression. Marx observed that every political economy—the primitive communal state, the slave era epoch, the pre-capitalist society, and the bourgeois society—contains the seeds of its own destruction. Thus, according to Marx, there are within capitalism enough internal contradictions to generate a class division dramatic enough to overwhelm the very system that produced it. Specifically, there exist many poor and propertyless workers who live very modestly, receiving subsistence wages for their exhausting labor, while their employers live in luxury. When both these groups of people, the haves and the have-nots, become conscious of themselves as classes, said Marx, class struggle ensues and ultimately topples the system that produced these classes.¹² It is important to emphasize the

dynamic nature of class. Classes do not simply appear. They are slowly and painstakingly formed by similarly situated people who share the same wants and needs. According to Marx, people who belong to any class initially have no more unity than do "potatoes in a sack of potatoes."¹³ But through a long and complex process of struggling together about issues of local and later national interest to them, a group of individuals gradually becomes a unity, a true class. Because class unity is difficult to achieve, its importance cannot be overstated, said Marx. As soon as a group is fully conscious of itself as a class, it has a better chance of achieving its fundamental goals. There is power in group awareness.

Class consciousness is, in the Marxist framework, the opposite of false consciousness, a state of mind that impedes the creation and maintenance of true class unity. False consciousness causes exploited people to believe they are as free to act and speak as their exploiters. The bourgeoisie is especially adept at fooling the proletariat. For this reason, Marxists discredit egalitarian, or welfare, liberalism, for example, as a ruling-class ideology that tricks workers into believing their employers actually care about them. As Marxists see it, fringe benefits such as generous health-care plans and paid maternity leave are not gifts employers generously bestow on workers but rather a means to pull the wool over their eyes. Grateful for the benefits their employers give them, workers minimize their own hardships and suffering. Like the ruling class, they begin to perceive the status quo as the best possible world for workers and employers alike. The more benefits employers give them, the less likely workers will be to form a class capable of recognizing their true needs as human beings.

Because Marxist and socialist feminists wish to view women as a collectivity, Marxist teachings on class and class consciousness play a large role in Marxist and socialist feminist thought. Much debate within the Marxist and socialist feminist community has centered on the following question: Do women, per se, constitute a class? Given that some women are wives, daughters, friends, and lovers of bourgeois men, whereas other women bear these relationships to proletarian men, women do not constitute a single class in the strict Marxist sense. Yet bourgeois and proletarian women's domestic experiences, for example, may bear enough similarities to motivate unifying struggles such as the 1970s wages-for-housework campaign, which we will discuss later. Thus, many Marxist and socialist feminists believe women can gain a consciousness of themselves as a class of workers by insisting, for example, that domestic work be recognized as real—that is, productive—work. The observation that wives and mothers usually love the people for whom they work does not mean that cooking, cleaning, and child care are not

productive work. At most it means that wives' and mothers' working conditions are better than those of people who work for employers they dislike.¹⁴

By keeping the Marxist conceptions of class and class consciousness in mind, we can understand another concept that often plays a role in Marxist and socialist feminist thought: alienation. Like many Marxist terms, "alienation" is difficult to define simply. In *Karl Marx*, Allen Wood suggested we are alienated "if we either experience our lives as meaningless or ourselves as worthless, or else are capable of sustaining a sense of meaning and self-worth only with the help of illusions about ourselves or our condition."¹⁵ Robert Heilbroner added that alienation is a profoundly fragmenting experience. Things or persons that are or should be connected in some significant way are instead viewed as separate. As Heilbroner saw it, this sense of fragmentation and meaninglessness is particularly strong under capitalism.

As a result of invidious class distinctions, as well as the highly specialized and highly segmented nature of the work process, human existence loses its unity and wholeness in four basic ways, according to Heilbroner. First, workers are alienated from the product of their labor. Not only do they have no say in what commodities they will or will not produce, but the fruits of their labor are snatched from them. Therefore, the satisfaction of determining when, where, how, and to whom to sell these commodities is denied the workers. What should partially express and constitute their being-as-workers confronts them as a thing apart, a thing alien.¹⁶

Second, workers are alienated from themselves because when experienced as something unpleasant, to be gotten through as quickly as possible, work is deadening. When the potential source of workers' humanization becomes the actual source of their dehumanization, workers may undergo a major psychological crisis. They may start feeling like hamsters on a hamster wheel, going nowhere.¹⁷

Third, workers are alienated from other human beings because the structure of the capitalist economy encourages and even forces workers to see one another as competitors for jobs and promotions. When the source of workers' solidarity (the experience of other workers as cooperators, friends, people to be with) becomes instead the source of their isolation (the experience of other workers as competitors, enemies, people to avoid), workers become disidentified with one another, losing an opportunity to add joy and meaning to their lives.¹⁸

Fourth, workers are alienated from nature because the kind of work they do and the conditions under which they do it make them see nature as an obstacle to their survival. This negative perception of nature sets up an opposition where, in fact, a connectedness should exist—the connectedness

among all elements in nature. The elimination of this type of alienation, entailing a return to a humane kind of work environment, is yet another important justification for the overthrow of capitalism.¹⁹

Building on the idea that in a capitalist society human relations take on an alienated nature in which "the individual only feels himself or herself when detached from others,"²⁰ socialist feminist Ann Foreman claimed that this state of affairs is worse for women than for men:

The man exists in the social world of business and industry as well as in the family and therefore is able to express himself in these different spheres. For the woman, however, her place is within the home. Men's objectification within industry, through the expropriation of the product of their labour, takes the form of alienation. But the effect of alienation on the lives and consciousness of women takes an even more oppressive form. Men seek relief from their alienation through their relations with women, for women there is no relief. For these intimate relations are the very ones that are essential structures of [their] oppression.²¹

As Foreman saw it, women's alienation is profoundly disturbing because women experience themselves not as selves but as others. All too often, said Foreman, a woman's sense of self depends entirely on her family and friends' appreciation of her. If they express loving feelings toward her, she will be happy, but if they fail to give her even a thank-you, she will be sad. Thus, Marxist and socialist feminists aim to create a world in which women can experience themselves as whole persons, as integrated rather than fragmented beings, as people who can be happy even when unable to make their families and friends happy.

The Marxist Theory of Politics

Like the Marxist theories of economics and society, the Marxist theory of politics offers Marxist and socialist feminists insights to help liberate women from the forces that oppress them. As noted previously, class struggle takes a certain form within the workplace because the interests of the employers are not those of the workers. Whereas it is in the employers' interests to use any tactics necessary (harassment, firing, violence) to get workers to labor ever more effectively and efficiently for fewer wages than their work is worth, it is in the workers' interests to use any counterattacks necessary (sick time, coffee breaks, strikes) to limit the extent to which employers use their labor power to produce sheer profit for themselves.

The relatively small, everyday class conflicts occurring within the capitalist workplace serve as preliminaries to the full-fledged, large-scale class struggles that Marx envisioned. As noted earlier, Marx predicted that as workers became increasingly aware of their common exploitation and alienation, they would achieve class consciousness. United, they could to fight their employers for control over the means of production (e.g., the nation's factories). If they managed to win this fight, Marx claimed that a highly committed, politically savvy, well-trained group of revolutionaries would subsequently emerge from the workers' ranks. Marx termed this special group of workers the "vanguard" of the full-scale revolution for which he hoped. More than anything else, Marx desired to replace capitalism with socialism, a non-exploitative, nonalienating political economy through which communism, "the complete and conscious return of man himself as a social, that is, human being," could come into existence.

Under capitalism, Marx suggested, people are largely free to do what they want within the confines of the system, but they have little say in determining the confines themselves. "Personality," said Marx, "is conditioned and determined by quite definite class relationships."²³ Decades later, Richard Schmitt elaborated on Marx's powerful statement:

In as much as persons do certain jobs in society, they tend to acquire certain character traits, interests, habits, and so on. Without such adaptations to the demands of their particular occupations, they would not be able to do a great job. A capitalist who cannot bear to win in competition, or to outsmart someone, will not be a capitalist for long. A worker who is unwilling to take orders will not work very often. In this way we are shaped by the work environment, and this fact limits personal freedom for it limits what we can choose to be.²⁴

In contrast, in Marxists' view, to people living under capitalism, those living under communism are free not only to do, but also to be, what they want, because they have the power to see clearly and change the system that shapes them.

If we read between these lines, we can appreciate another of Marxism's major appeals to Marxist and socialist feminists. It promises to reconstruct human nature in ways that preclude all the pernicious dichotomies that have made slaves of some and masters of others. Marxism also promises to make people free, a promise women would like to see kept. There is, after all, something very liberating about the idea of women and men constructing together the social structures and social roles that will permit both genders to realize their full human potential.

The Marxist Theory of Family Relations

Although the fathers of Marxism did not take women's oppression as women nearly as seriously as they did women's (and certainly men's) oppression as workers, some of them did offer explanations for why women are oppressed qua women. With the apparent blessing of Marx, Engels wrote *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* (1845), in which he showed how changes in the material conditions of people affect the organization of their family relations. He argued that before the family, or structured conjugal relations, there existed a primitive state of "promiscuous intercourse."²⁵ In this early state, every woman was fair game for every man. All were essentially married to all. In the process of natural selection, suggested Engels, various kinds of blood relatives were gradually excluded from consideration as eligible marriage partners.²⁶ As fewer and fewer women in the tribal group became available to any given man, individual men began to put forcible claims on individual women as their possessions. As a result, the pairing family, in which one man marries one woman, came into existence.

Noting that when a man took a woman, he came to live in her household, Engels interpreted this state of affairs as a sign of women's economic power. Because women's work was vital for the tribe's survival and because women produced most of the material goods (e.g., bedding, clothing, cookware, tools) that could be passed on to future generations, Engels concluded that early pairing societies were probably matrilineal, with inheritance and lines of descent traced through the mother.²⁷ Later, Engels speculated that pairing societies may have been not merely matrilineal but also matriarchal, with women ruling at the political, social, and economic levels.²⁸ But his main and less debatable point remained that any power women held in past times was rooted in their position in the household, at that time the center of production.²⁹ Only if the site of production changed would women lose their advantageous position.³⁰ As it turned out, said Engels, a site change did occur. The "domestication of animals and the breeding of herds" outside the household led to an entirely new source of wealth for the human community.³¹ Men gained control of the tribe's animals (Engels did not tell us why or how),³² and the male-female power balance shifted in favor of men, as men learned to produce more than enough animals to meet the tribe's needs for milk and meat.

Surplus animals constituted an accumulation of wealth that men used as a means of exchange between tribes. Possessing more than enough of a valuable socioeconomic good, men found themselves increasingly preoccupied with the issue of property inheritance. Directed through the mother's line, property inheritance was originally a minor matter of the bequest of a

"house, clothing, crude ornaments and the tools for obtaining and preparing food—boats, weapons and domestic utensils of the simplest kinds."³⁵ As production outside the household began to outstrip production within it, the traditional sexual division of labor between men and women, which had supposedly arisen out of the physiological differences between the sexes—specifically, the sex act³⁶—took on new social meanings. As men's work and production grew in importance, not only did the value of women's work and production decrease, but so did the status of women within society. Because men now possessed things more valuable than the things women possessed, and because men, for some unexplained reason, suddenly wanted their own biological children to get their possessions, men exerted enormous pressure to convert society from matrilineal to patrilineal. As Engels phrased it, mother right had "to be overthrown, and overthrown it was."³⁵

Engels presented the "overthrow of mother right" as "the world-historic defeat of the female sex."³⁶ Having produced and staked a claim to wealth, men took control of the household, reducing women to the "slaves" of men's carnal desire and "mere instrument[s] for the production of [men's] children."³⁷ In this new familial order, said Engels, the husband ruled by virtue of his economic power: "He is the bourgeois and the wife represents the proletariat."³⁸ Engels believed men's power over women stemmed from the fact that men, not women, controlled private property. The oppression of women would cease only with the dissolution of the institution of private property.

The emergence of private property and the shift to patrilineage also explained, for Engels, the transition to the monogamous family. Before the advent of technologies such as in vitro fertilization, it was always possible to identify the biological mother of a child. If the child came out of a woman's body, the child was the biological product of her egg and some man's sperm. In contrast, before the development of DNA testing, the identity of a biological father was uncertain because a man other than her husband could have impregnated the mother. Thus, to secure their wives' marital fidelity, men imposed the institution of heterosexual monogamy on women, the purpose of which was, according to Engels, to provide a vehicle for the guaranteed transfer of a father's private property to his biological children. Male dominance, in the forms of patrilineage and patriarchy, is simply the result of the class division between the propertied man and the propertyless woman. Engels commented that monogamy was "the first form of the family to be based not on natural but on economic conditions."³⁹ In his estimation, the monogamous family is the product not of love and commitment but of power plays and economic exigencies.

Because Engels viewed monogamous marriage under capitalism as an economic institution that has nothing to do with love and everything to do with the transfer of private property, he insisted that emancipation of wives from their husbands would require first that women become economically independent of men. He stressed that the first presupposition for the emancipation of women is "the reintroduction of the entire female sex into public industry," and the second is the socialization of housework and child rearing.⁴⁰ Remarkably, Engels believed that proletarian women experience less oppression than do bourgeois women. As he saw it, the bourgeois family consists of a relationship between a husband and a wife in which the husband agrees to support his wife, provided she promises to remain sexually faithful to him and to produce only his legitimate heirs. "This marriage of convenience," observed Engels, "often enough turns into the crassest prostitution—sometimes on both sides, but much more generally on the part of the wife, who differs from the ordinary courtesan only in that she does not hire out her body, like a wageworker, on piecework, but sells it into slavery once and for all."⁴¹

In contrast to the bourgeois marriage, the proletarian marriage is not, in Engels's estimation, a mode of prostitution, because the material conditions of the proletarian family differ substantially from those of the bourgeois family. Not only is the proletariat's lack of private property significant in removing the primary male incentive for monogamy—namely, the reproduction of legitimate heirs for one's property—but the general employment of proletarian women as workers outside the home also leads to a measure of equality between husband and wife. This equality, according to Engels, provides the foundation of true "sex-love." In addition to these differences, the household authority of the proletarian husband, unlike that of the bourgeois husband, is not likely to receive the full support of the legal establishment. For all these reasons, Engels concluded that with the exception of "residual brutality" (spouse abuse), all "the material foundations of male dominance had ceased to exist" in the proletarian home.⁴²

Classical Marxist Feminism: General Reflections

Evelyn Reed

Affirming the ideas of Marx and Engels, classical Marxist feminists tried to use a class rather than a gender analysis to explain women's oppression. A good example of classical Marxist feminism appeared in Evelyn Reed's "Women: Caste, Class, or Oppressed Sex?"⁴³ Stressing that the same capitalist

economic forces and social relations that "brought about the oppression of one class by another, one race by another, and one nation by another"⁴⁴ also brought about the oppression of one sex by another. Reed resisted the view that women's oppression as women is the worst kind of oppression for all women. Although she agreed that relative to men, women occupy a subordinate position in a patriarchal or male-dominated society, she did not think that all women were equally oppressed by men or that no women were guilty of oppressing men or other women. On the contrary, she thought bourgeois women capable of oppressing both proletarian men and women. In a capitalist system, money is most often power.

Not found in Reed is any manifesto urging all women to band together to wage a "caste war" against all men.⁴⁵ Rather, she encouraged oppressed women to join oppressed men in a "class war" against their common capitalist oppressors, female as well as male.⁴⁶ Reed deemed misguided the insistence that all women, simply by virtue of possessing two X chromosomes, belong to the same class. On the contrary, she maintained that "women, like men are a multiclass sex."⁴⁷ Specifically, she maintained that "women, common with bourgeois women, who are the economic, social, and political, as well as sexual, partners of the bourgeois men to whom they are linked. Bourgeois women are united not with proletarian women but with bourgeois men" in defense of private property, profiteering, militarism, racism—and the exploitation of other women.⁴⁸

Clearly Reed believed that the primary enemy of at least proletarian women is not patriarchy but, first and foremost, capitalism. Optimistic about male-female relations in a postcapitalist society, Reed maintained that "far from being eternal, woman's subjection and the bitter hostility between the sexes are no more than a few thousand years old. They were produced by the drastic social changes which brought the family, private property, and the state into existence."⁴⁹ With the end of capitalist male-female relationships, both sexes would thrive in a communist society that enabled all its members to cooperate with one another in communities of care.⁵⁰

Margaret Benston

Unable to find in Reed's theory a satisfying explanation for why, on average, women were not faring as well as men in the productive workforce, some Marxist feminists turned their attention to the productive workforce, some domestic realm—work that men typically did not do. Trying to explain why women were saddled with their families' domestic work, whether or not they participated in the productive workforce, Margaret Benston defined women

as that class of people "responsible for the production of simple use-values in those activities associated with the house and family."⁵¹ As she saw it, women must break out of this class to be liberated but could not do so unless their domestic labor was socialized: "Women, particularly married women with children, who work outside the home simply do two jobs; their participation in the labor force is only allowed if they continue to fulfill their first responsibility in the home. . . . Equal access to jobs outside the home, while one of the preconditions for women's liberation, will not in itself be sufficient to give equality for women; as long as work in the home remains a matter of private production and is the responsibility of women, they will simply carry a double work-load."⁵²

To bring women into the productive workforce without simultaneously socializing the jobs of cooking, cleaning, and child care would exacerbate women's oppressed condition, claimed Benston. To be sure, she conceded, the socialization of domestic work might lead to women doing the same sorts of "female" work both inside and outside the home. But the simple fact that women would be doing this "female" work outside their own homes for wages over which they had control would constitute an advancement for women, insisted Benston.

Wages for Housework

Mariarosa Costa and Selma James

Agreeing with Benston that the socialization of domestic work would be necessary to achieve full liberation for women in a socialist society, Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James nonetheless argued that in a capitalist society, the best (or at least the most efficient) way for women to achieve economic parity with men might not be for women to enter the productive workforce and for domestic labor to be socialized, but instead for women to stay at home and demand wages for the "real"—that is, productive—work they did there. Unlike most classical Marxist feminist thinkers, Dalla Costa and James claimed that women's work inside the home does generate surplus value.⁵³ They reasoned that women's domestic work is the necessary condition for all other labor, from which, in turn, surplus value is extracted. By providing not only food and clothes but also emotional comfort to current (and future) workers, women keep the cogs of the capitalist machine running. Therefore, argued Dalla Costa and James, men's employers should pay women wages for the housework they do.⁵⁴ Let housewives get the cash that would otherwise fatten employers' wallets.⁵⁵

Acknowledging that domestic labor could be viewed as productive work, most Marxist feminists nonetheless concluded that, for a number of reasons, paying women wages for housework was neither as feasible nor as desirable as Dalla Costa and James seemed to think. First, if required to pay housewives wages for housework, employers would probably pay lower wages in general. Under such circumstances, the total capitalist profit margin would remain high, and the material conditions of workers would not improve. Second, not all or even most women in advanced capitalist economies are stay-at-home domestic workers. Many married women and men work outside the home, as do many single men and women. Would employers be required to compensate all workers for their at-home domestic work? If so, would employers have any way to monitor the quantity and quality of this domestic labor? Third, if required to pay all their workers for domestic work, most small companies would probably go out of business. Back in 1972, the height of the wages-for-housework campaign, the Chase Manhattan Bank estimated that "for her average 100-hour workweek, the housewife should be paid \$257.53."⁵⁶ In that same year, noted Ann Crittenden Scott, "white males had average incomes of \$172 a week; white females had average incomes of \$108 a week."⁵⁷ By 2015, over forty years later, annual median earnings per week in the United States were \$726 for women and \$895 for men.⁵⁸ Add to these median wages new wages for domestic labor, done by employees in their own homes, and there is little question that most small or even large companies could not sustain such a hit.⁵⁹

On balance, it does not seem feasible to pay anyone, including wives, girlfriends, mothers, and daughters, wages for housework. But even if doing so were feasible, would it be desirable? Many Marxist and other feminists in the 1970s were not confident that wages for housework would liberate women. Carol Lopate, among others, argued that paying women for housework would have the net effect of keeping them isolated in their own homes with few opportunities to do anything other than routinized and repetitious work.

The decrease in house size and the mechanization of housework have meant that the housewife is potentially left with much greater leisure time; however, she is often kept busy buying, using, and repairing devices which are theoretically geared toward saving her time. Moreover, the trivial, manufactured tasks which many of these technological aids perform are hardly a source of satisfaction for housewives. Max-Pac may give "perfect coffee every time," but even a compliment about her coffee can offer little more than fleeting satisfaction to the housewife. Finally, schools, nurseries, day care, and television have taken from mothers much of their responsibility for the socialization of their children.⁶⁰

Additionally, paying women wages for domestic work would give women little impetus to work outside the household. As a result, the traditional sexual division of labor would be strengthened. Women outside the home would have little incentive to do "men's work."⁶¹ One thinks here of the stereotypical stay-at-home supermom who is at the beck and call of her children to shuttle them to and from multiple sports events, club meetings, parties, mall visits, and the like.

Contemporary Socialist Feminism: General Reflections

The more Marxist feminists realized that, like everyone else, they had unreflectively assumed domestic work to be women's work, the more concerned they became that the advent of communist/socialist societies had not resulted in the socialization of this labor. Rather than an approximately equal number of men and women doing domestic work for wages, it was business as usual. That is, women continued to do domestic work "for free," whether or not they had a paid job outside the home. Unable to explain in exclusively economic terms why domestic work is viewed as women's work in socialist as well as capitalist societies, many Marxist feminists concluded that domestic work is assigned to women in all societies simply because all women belong to the same sex class—namely, the second (female) sex, which is thought to exist to serve the first (male) sex.

The Marxist feminists who decided that, in addition to economic class, women's sex class plays a role in women's oppression began to refer to themselves as socialist feminists or materialist feminists. This evolving group of feminist thinkers initially aimed to develop one theory powerful enough to explain the complex ways in which capitalism and patriarchy allied to oppress women. This effort gave rise, as might be predicted, not to a unitary theory but to a variety of theories that sorted themselves into two types: (1) two-system explanations of women's oppression, and (2) interactive-system explanations of women's oppression.

Contemporary Two-System Explanations of Women's Oppression

Two-system explanations of women's oppression typically combine a Marxist feminist account of class power with a radical feminist account of sex status.⁶² According to Chris Beasley, some two-system explanations adhere to the Marxist base-superstructure model that views economics as "the fundamental motor of social relations,"⁶³ shaping the form of society, including its

ideologies and psychologies. These explanations claim that, at root, women have more to fear from capitalist forces than from patriarchal forces. In contrast, other two-system explanations that are less committed to the Marxist base-superstructure model imply that patriarchy, not capitalism, may be women's ultimate worst enemy.

Juliet Mitchell

In the early 1970s, Juliet Mitchell sketched a plausible two-system explanation of women's oppression. In *Women's Estates*,⁶⁴ she abandoned the classical Marxist feminist position that a woman's condition is simply a function of her relation to capital, of whether she is part of the productive workforce. In place of this monocausal explanation, Mitchell suggested that women's status and function are multiply determined by their role in not only production but also reproduction, the socialization of children, and sexuality.⁶⁵ The error of the old Marxist way was to see the other three elements as reducible to the economic; hence the call for the entry into production was accompanied by the purely abstract slogan of the abolition of the family. Economic demands are still *primary*, but must be accompanied by coherent policies for the other three elements (reproduction, sexuality and socialization), policies which at particular junctures may take over the primary role in immediate action.⁶⁶

In attempting to determine which of these elements most oppressed 1970s US women, Mitchell concluded that they had not made enough progress in the areas of production, reproduction, and the socialization of children. She noted that even though women were just as physically and psychologically qualified as men for high-paying, prestigious jobs, employers continued to confine women to low-paying, low-status work.⁶⁶ Moreover, said Mitchell, despite the widespread availability of safe, effective, and inexpensive reproduction-controlling technologies, women often failed or refused to use them. As a result, the causal chain of "maternity—family—absence from production and public life—sexual inequality" continued to bind women to their subordinate status. Furthermore, although 1970s US women had far fewer children than US women did at the turn of the century, the modern women spent no less time socializing them.⁶⁷ In fact, the and psychological need, seemed to be increasing.

Interestingly, like radical-libertarian feminists, Mitchell thought 1970s US women had made major progress in the area of sexuality. She claimed that unlike previous generations, 1970s US women felt free to express and act upon their sexual desires publicly. Still, Mitchell acknowledged that, pushed to its extreme, women's newly won sexual liberation could mutate

into a form of sexual oppression. Whereas turn-of-the-century US society may have condemned sexually active women as "wanton whores," 1970s US society tended to celebrate them as "sex experimenters" or healthy role models for sexually repressed women to emulate. Commenting on this state of affairs, Mitchell observed that too much sex, like too little, can be oppressive.⁶⁸ Women can be made to feel that something is wrong with them if they are not sexually active or sexually preoccupied.

Mitchell speculated that patriarchal ideology, which views women as lovers, wives, and mothers rather than as workers, is almost as responsible as capitalist economics for women's position in society. She claimed that even if a Marxist revolution destroyed the family as an economic unit, women would not automatically become men's equals. Because of how patriarchal ideology has constructed men's and women's psyches, women would probably continue to remain subordinate to men until their and men's minds had been liberated from the idea that women are somehow less valuable than men.

Alison Jaggar

Like Mitchell, Alison Jaggar provided a two-system explanation of women's oppression. But in the final analysis, instead of identifying capitalism as the primary cause of women's low status, she reserved this honor for patriarchy. Capitalism oppresses women as workers, but patriarchy oppresses them as women, an oppression that affects women's identity as well as their activity. A woman is always a woman, even when she is not working. Rejecting the classical Marxist doctrine that a person must participate directly in the capitalist relations of production to be considered truly alienated, Jaggar claimed, as did Foreman, that all women, no matter their work role, are alienated in ways that men are not.⁶⁹

Jaggar organized her discussion of women's alienation under the headings of sexuality, motherhood, and intellectuality. In the same way that wage workers may be alienated from the product(s) on which they work, women, viewed simply as women, may be alienated from the "product(s)" on which they typically work: their bodies. Women may insist that they diet, exercise, and dress only to please themselves, but in reality they most likely shape and adorn their flesh primarily for the pleasure of men. Moreover, women do not have final or total say about when, where, how, or by whom their bodies will be used, because their bodies can be suddenly appropriated through acts ranging from the male gaze to sexual harassment to rape. Likewise, to the same degree that wage workers can be gradually alienated from themselves—their bodies beginning to feel like things, mere machines from which labor

power is extracted—women can be gradually alienated from themselves. To the degree that women work on their bodies—shaving their underarms, slimming their thighs, augmenting their breasts, painting their nails, and coloring their hair—they may start to experience their bodies as objects or commodities. Finally, just as many wage workers compete with one another for their employers' approbation and rewards, many women compete with one another for men's power and wealth.⁷⁰

In the same vein as Adrienne Rich (see Chapter 2), Jaggar continued that motherhood may also be an alienating experience for women, especially when mostly or exclusively men decide the policies and laws that regulate women's reproductive choices. For example, societies that heavily use children's labor power may pressure women to bear as many offspring as physically possible. In contrast, societies that view children as an economic burden for parents or support may discourage women from having large families. Indeed, women may be pressured or even forced to use contraception, undergo sterilization, or have an abortion.⁷¹

Furthering her analysis, Jaggar said women may be alienated from the product as well as the process of their reproductive labor. Raising the same type of concerns that some radical-cultural feminists raised about gestational surrogacy, Jaggar claimed that such arrangements do not do full justice to the gestational mother, whose reproductive work shapes the embryo into a viable human infant to which she may become emotionally as well as physically bonded. Should not this circumstance give her some parental claim to the child, even though she did not provide the "raw material," the egg, asked Jaggar?⁷²

Child rearing, like childbearing, may also be an alienating experience for women when scientific experts (most of whom are men) take charge of it, with virtually no assistance, they are supposed to execute every edict issued by child-rearing authorities, some of whom have never experienced the daily demands of child rearing. Echoing the thoughts of Rich in *Of Woman Born*, Jaggar explained how contemporary child-rearing practices may ultimately alienate or estrange mothers from their children. The extreme mutual dependence of mother and child encourages the mother to define the child primarily with reference to her own needs for meaning, love, and social recognition. She sees the child as her product, as something that should improve her life and often instead stands against her, as something of supreme value, whose life is viewed as more important than hers, for example, by antiabortionists. The social relations of contemporary motherhood often make it impossible for a woman to see her child as part of a larger community to which both the child and she belong.⁷⁴

Finally, women may be alienated from their own intellectual capacities, according to Jaggar. Many women feel so unsure of themselves that they hesitate to express their ideas in public for fear that their thoughts do no merit articulation; they remain silent when they should loudly voice their opinions. Worse, when women do express themselves forcefully and with passion, their ideas are often rejected as irrational or the product of mere emotion. To the extent that men set the terms of thought and discourse, suggested Jaggar, women cannot be at ease in the world of theory.⁷⁵

Jaggar concluded that although the overthrow of capitalism might end women's as well as men's exploitation in the productive workforce, it would not necessarily end women's alienation from everything and everyone, especially themselves.⁷⁶ Only the overthrow of patriarchy would enable women to become full persons.

Contemporary Interactive-System Explanations of Women's Oppression

In contrast to two-system explanations, which, as just noted, tended to identify either class or sex as the primary source of women's oppression, interactive-system explanations strove to present capitalism and patriarchy as coequal partners colluding in a variety of ways to oppress women. Interactive-system thinkers included Iris Marion Young and Heidi Hartmann, both of whom used such terms as "capitalist patriarchy" or "patriarchal capitalism" in their work. Aiming not to view one system as more fundamental than the other, Young and Hartmann wrote about how capitalism and patriarchy work together to cause and then maintain women's oppression.

Iris Marion Young

According to Iris Marion Young, as long as classical Marxist feminists try to use class as their central category of analysis, they will fail to explain why women in socialist countries are often just as oppressed as women in capitalist countries. Precisely because class is a gender-blind category, said Young, it cannot provide an adequate explanation for women's specific oppression. Only a gender-sighted category such as the "sexual division of labor" has the conceptual power to do this.

Young reasoned that whereas class analysis looks at the system of production as a whole, focusing on the means and relations of production in the most general terms possible, a sexual division-of-labor analysis pays attention to the characteristics of the individuals who do the producing in society. In other words, a class analysis calls only for a general discussion

of the respective roles of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, whereas a sexual division-of-labor analysis requires a detailed discussion of who gives and who takes the orders, who does the stimulating work and who counts the beans, who works more or fewer hours, and who gets paid relatively high or relatively low wages. Therefore, as compared with a class analysis, a sexual division-of-labor analysis can better explain why women usually take the orders, count the beans, work part-time, and get paid relatively low wages, whereas men usually give the orders, do the stimulating jobs, work full-time, and get paid relatively high wages.

Because she believed capitalism and patriarchy are necessarily linked, Young insisted that a sexual division-of-labor analysis is a total substitute for, not a mere supplement to, class analysis. We do not need one theory (Marxism) to explain gender-neutral capitalism and another theory (feminism) to explain gender-biased patriarchy, said Young. Rather, we need a single theory—a socialist feminist theory—to explain gender-biased (i.e., patriarchal) capitalism. *My thesis*, wrote Young, *“is that marginalization of women and thereby our functioning as a secondary labor force is an essential and fundamental characteristic of capitalism.”*⁷⁷

Young’s controversial thesis marked a major departure from the more traditional Marxist view that workers, be they male or female, are interchangeable. She argued that capitalism is very much aware of its workers’ gender and, we may add, race and ethnicity. Because a large reserve of unemployed workers is necessary to keep wages low and to meet unanticipated demand for goods and services, capitalism has both implicit and explicit criteria for determining who will constitute its primary, employed and secondary, unemployed workforces. For a variety of reasons, not the least being a well-entrenched gender division of labor, capitalism’s criteria identify men as “primary” workforce material and women as “secondary.” Because women are needed at home in a way men are not—or so patriarchy believes—men are freer to work outside the home than women are.

Under capitalism as it exists today, women experience patriarchy as unequal wages for equal work, sexual harassment on the job, uncompensated domestic labor, and the pernicious public-private split. Earlier generations of women also experienced patriarchy, but they lived it differently, reasoned Young. Patriarchy should not be considered a system separate from capitalism, just because it existed first. In fact, class and gender structures are so intertwined that neither actually precedes the other. A feudal system of gender relations accompanied a feudal system of class arrangements, and the social relations of class and gender grew up together and evolved over time into the forms we now know (e.g., the capitalist nuclear family). To say

gender relations are independent of class relations is to ignore how history works.

Heidi Hartmann

Reinforcing Young’s analysis, Heidi Hartmann noted that a strict class analysis leaves largely unexplained why women rather than men play the subordinate and submissive roles in both the workplace and the home. Understanding not only workers’ relation to capital but also women’s relation to men, said Hartmann, required integrating a feminist analysis of patriarchy with a Marxist analysis of capitalism. In her estimation, the partnership between patriarchy and capitalism is complex because their interests in women are not always the same. In the nineteenth century, for example, proletarian men wanted proletarian women to stay at home, where women could “personally service” men.⁷⁸ In contrast, bourgeois men wanted proletarian women to work for next to nothing in the productive workforce, grateful for the opportunity to earn “pin money” to supplement their partners’ puny take-home pay. Only if all men—be they proletarian or bourgeois—could find some mutually agreeable way to handle this particular “woman question” could the interests of patriarchy and capitalism be harmonized.

To some degree the tension between bourgeois and proletarian men’s best interests was ameliorated when bourgeois men (e.g., factory owners) offered to pay proletarian men (e.g., factory workers) a (family) wage large enough to enable proletarian wives and mothers to stay at home, said Hartmann. Bourgeois men struck this bargain with proletarian men for two reasons: (1) stay-at-home housewives would produce and maintain healthier, happier, and therefore more productive male workers than working wives would, and (2) women and children could always be persuaded at a later date to enter the workforce for low wages should male workers demand high wages. For a time, this arrangement worked well enough, but over time, the size of the family wage shrank, and many proletarian men could no longer pay all their families’ bills. Consequently, many proletarian women decided to enter the workforce to earn not “pin money” but enough income to help their male partners defray the family’s actual living costs.⁷⁹ Regrettably, these women typically came home to male partners who had little or no interest in helping with domestic work. Hartmann concluded that women were in a no-win situation when it came to work-related issues. Everywhere women turned, the sexual division of labor disadvantaged them. The only hope for women was to break the symbiotic relationship between capitalism and patriarchy. Thus, Hartmann claimed, women’s real enemy was the unitary system of capitalist patriarchy/patriarchal capitalism.

Contemporary Women's Labor Issues

The preceding discussion suggests that the distinctions some socialist feminists make between two-system and interactive-system explanations for women's oppression are somewhat forced and probably of more theoretical than practical interest to the average woman. Yet we cannot overstate the relevance of contemporary socialist feminism's overall message for women worldwide, women's oppression correlates strongly to the fact that women work, be it in- or outside the home, is still unpaid, underpaid, or disvalued, a state of affairs that largely explains women's lower status and power nearly everywhere.

Although we could elaborate much more about women's domestic work suffice it to say that according to a 2010 United Nations Development Programme report, "The omission of unpaid care work from national accounts leads to sizeable undercounts in all countries. By applying the wage rate of a general household worker to the number of hours that people spend on housework, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development estimates that the omissions equal 10 to 39 percent of GDP." Incorporating unpaid work in national accounts would better reflect the realities of time use, especially for women.⁸⁰ Whether they live in developing or developed, socialist or capitalist countries, women still do the majority of unpaid work in the home, even when they also do full- or part-time paid work outside the home. As of 2009, US women did 25.9 hours to US men's 16.8 hours of domestic work a week. Moreover, US women did 3.9 hours of child care a day, compared to US men's 1.8 hours. When these hours are added to US working women's forty-hour-a-week shift, it seems clear that women are indeed working nearly a double day.⁸¹ Add to this workload the amount of hours some women spend caring for relatives, typically 21.9 hours a week, and one begins to wonder how long women can maintain this kind of pace.⁸²

The amount of housework women do is a global as well as local phenomenon. In 2014, said the World Bank Group, "by virtually every global measure, women [were] more economically excluded, dropping from 75 to 55 percent of the global workforce."⁸³ One of the main reasons given for women exiting the workforce was their increased caregiving responsibilities in the home. Worldwide, women spend at least twice as much time on unpaid domestic work such as child care and housekeeping than they spend on paid work in the factory or office, for example.⁸⁴ It does not help the situation that, globally, one in three girls in developing countries is married before reaching her eighteenth birthday.⁸⁵ Girls that marry early are less likely to work outside the home than women who complete a higher education degree, which at least qualifies them to work outside the home.⁸⁶

Gender Pay Gap

Most, though not all, countries have a gender pay gap, in the estimation of Shawn Meghan Burn. Japan's is particularly egregious. In 2011, Japanese women between the ages of thirty and thirty-four earned only 69 percent of Japanese men's wages.⁸⁷ Interestingly, the situation was dramatically different in Sweden, where women earned approximately 83 percent of men's wages⁸⁸ in the United States in 2015, women earned 91 percent as much as men in Washington, DC, and only 66 percent of what men earned in Louisiana.⁸⁹ What is more, evidence indicates that the wage gap is widening between US men and women.⁹⁰ Christina Huffington pointed out that, on average, US women receive seventy-seven cents for every dollar paid to men—the gap is even worse for African American and Latin American/Latina/Chicana women.⁹¹ Indeed, Hispanic women showed the largest pay gap, earning only 54 percent of white men's earnings.⁹²

Some of the most frequently cited reasons for the gender pay gap are (1) the concentration of women in low-paying, female-dominated jobs, (2) the high percentage of women who work part-time rather than full-time, and (3) outright wage discrimination against women. Worldwide, women tend to engage in service work (teaching, nursing, child care, elder care), clerical work, agricultural work (picking fruit), and light industrial work (producing clothes, shoes, toys, and electronic devices), while men tend to engage in heavy industrial, transportation, management, administration, and policy work.

Although US women have gained some access to high-paying, male-dominated jobs like law and medicine, their numbers in these professions remain under 50 percent. A variety of reports done between 2012 and 2015 show that only one-third of lawyers and physicians in the United States are women.⁹³ Also worrisome is the fact that women in the workforce continue to hit the so-called glass ceiling—that is, "the invisible but effective barrier which prevents women from moving beyond a certain point on the promotion ladder."⁹⁴ For example, in the United States, women chief executive officers, especially in Fortune 500 companies, are still in the minority. As of January 25, 2015, there were only twenty-five female Fortune 500 CEOs, with Mary Barra, the head of General Motors, ranked seventh on the list.⁹⁵ In contrast, the numbers of women in less lucrative and prestigious jobs, such as human resources and accounting, are legion.⁹⁶ Similarly, it is no accident that just 33.8 percent of physicians and surgeons are female⁹⁷ or that female registered nurses comprise 91.1 percent of the total number of nurses in the United States.⁹⁸ Another notable statistic, once again related to the area of legal services, reveals that US women are more likely than US

men to work as relatively low-paid paralegals. Indeed, in the United States, women make up 84.3 percent of all paralegals and legal assistants.⁹⁹ Add to all these statistics the fact that men make up 75 percent of those in high-paid computer and mathematical occupations and over 94 percent of all high-paid mechanical engineers.¹⁰⁰ Experts on women's work equity underscore the importance of the statistics just enumerated. Unless their presence in high-paying, high-status occupations and professions in the United States rises to the 50 percent mark, women are unlikely to be treated as well as men in these fields.

Beyond US women's relative absence in certain high-paying jobs, another explanation for the gender pay gap is women's tendency to limit the time they devote to work in the productive workforce. Far more women than men work part-time,¹⁰¹ and far more women than men leave the productive workforce for months or even years to tend to family matters.¹⁰² Thus, over time, women earn less than men simply because they work fewer hours and years than men typically do. For example, it is estimated that female physicians lose an average of \$350,000 over a lifetime of work because of their spending less time in the workforce as compared to their male counterparts.¹⁰³

Although it is tempting to attribute the current gender pay gap to women's decision to work fewer hours or years in the paid workforce, this explanation does not address the question contemporary socialist feminists have since forcefully asked: Why do women limit their paid work outside the home in ways that men do not? Do women not want to work long hours outside the home? Do they view the money they earn as luxury money they can forsake? Or do they think it is their responsibility rather than men's to take time off work to rear their children properly or to care for sick relatives and aging parents, or both?

In addition to not answering why women, rather than men, limit their time in the workforce, the human-capital approach does not explain why many employers prefer to hire women as part-timers. Are female part-time workers—who, by the way, are usually not entitled to employer-paid benefits packages—easily motivated to work longer hours than they should? Acculturated to help out in a pinch, women who work part-time may work longer and harder than their contracts specify simply because they do not want to let other people down.

Feminist solutions to the gender pay gap vary, depending on which aspects get put under the microscope or require the most attention. Liberal feminists prefer the remedy of equal pay for equal work. They invoke legislation such as the US Equal Pay Act of 1963, which mandates that women's pay should equal men's when their positions are equal.¹⁰⁴ Although the Equal Pay Act sounds like an ideal tool for US women, it may not be. Equal

Pay Act civil suits put the burden of proof on plaintiff, who must prove that her work position is the same as that of a comparable male employee. Such proof might be relatively easy to secure in some lines of work, such as mail carrier or flight attendant, but it is far harder to secure in a profession such as law or medicine, where different labels such as "associate," "assistant," and "partner" can serve to make two virtually identical positions sound quite different.¹⁰⁵ Moreover, the usefulness of the Equal Pay Act as a reference point for gender-based civil suits seems predicated on women's gaining access to slots in male-dominated jobs or professions. The act does little, if anything, to question the sexual division of labor per se—that is, to question why the kinds of work men typically do tend to be valued more than the kinds of work women typically do.

Viewing liberal feminists' preference for an equal-pay-for-equal-work remedy for the gender pay gap as a capitulation to the view that women must be like men (in this instance, must work like men) to be valued like men, many contemporary socialist feminists have joined with many radical-cultural feminists to endorse a comparable-worth remedy for the gender pay gap, which they see as an opportunity not only to secure better wages for women but also to force society to reconsider why it pays some people so much and others so little.¹⁰⁶

Many social scientists are convinced that as long as women remain in traditionally female-dominated jobs and, more significantly, as long as society continues to assign less value to these jobs than to male-dominated jobs, the gender pay gap will persist. We need to ask ourselves why. In 2014, women in western Australia had to work ninety-eight extra days a year to make the same pay as men for the same work¹⁰⁷ and, on the average, sixty-four extra days to achieve pay equity with men for comparable work.¹⁰⁸ Do such pay differentials exist because supervising construction workers (a "male" job) is so much more physically, psychologically, and intellectually demanding than is counseling troubled people (a "female" job)? Or do they exist simply because most construction managers are men and most social workers are women?

Convinced that gender considerations factor into how much or how little workers are paid, comparable-worth advocates demand that employers evaluate their employees objectively by assigning so-called worth points to the four components found in most jobs: (1) "knowledge and skills," or the total amount of information or dexterity needed to perform the job; (2) "mental demands," or the extent to which the job requires decision making; (3) "accountability," or the amount of supervision the job entails; and (4) "working conditions," such as how physically safe the job is.¹⁰⁹ When Norman D. Willis and Associates used this index to establish the worth points for various jobs performed in the state of Washington in the 1980s, the company found

the following disparities: "A Food Service I, at 93 points, earned an average salary of \$472 per month, while a Delivery Truck Driver I, at 94 points, earned \$792. A Nurse Practitioner II, at 385 points, had average earnings of \$832, the same as those of a Boiler Operator, with only 144 points. A Homemaker I, with 198 points and an average salary of \$462, had the lowest earnings of all evaluated jobs."¹⁰ After reflecting on the Willis and Associates study, a federal court judge in Tacoma ruled that the state was in violation of Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act prohibiting discrimination by type of employment and level of compensation and should eliminate pay gaps within its systems.¹¹

On the average, contemporary socialist feminists support a comparable worth approach to further reducing the gender pay gap for two reasons—one addressing the feminization of poverty and the other the low value put on the kinds of work women traditionally do. According to Teresa Amott and Julie Matthaei, for example, we need to ask ourselves questions such as the following: "Why should those whose jobs give them the most opportunity to develop and use their abilities also be paid the most? The traditional argument—that higher pay must be offered as an incentive for workers to gain skills and training—is contradicted by the fact that our highly paid jobs attract many more workers than employers demand. And given unequal access to education and training, a hierarchical pay scheme becomes a mechanism for the intergenerational transmission of wealth privileges, with its historically-linked racism, sexism, and classism."¹²

Seemingly, the comparable-worth remedy for the gender pay gap has more potential to destabilize capitalist forces than does the equal-pay-for-equal-work remedy. The question is whether consumerism writ large has made it all too difficult for a sufficient number of people to challenge the status quo.

Women's Work in the Global Market

In recent years, contemporary socialist feminists have moved beyond analyzing the gender pay gap in developed countries to discussing women's working conditions in these regions. The forces of so-called globalization—described by the World Bank as the "growing integration of economies and societies around the world"¹³—have created very large, profit-driven multinational corporations, most with their point of origin in one or more developed countries and their point of destination in one or more developing countries. Interestingly, multinationals in developing countries prefer to hire women not only because so many women need work but also because their manual dexterity and cultural docility make them ideal sweatshop workers.

To better understand how much profit, say, a US multinational can make by moving its plants to a developing country, we need read only some late-1990s statistics compiled by Shawn Meghan Burn:

The *maquiladoras* of Mexico's border towns are but one example of women in the global factory. There, over 2,000 multinational corporations have drawn over a half million workers, two-thirds of them women, who get paid between \$3.75 and \$4.50 a day. In El Salvador, women employees of the Taiwanese *maquilador* Mandarin are forced to work shifts of 12 to 21 hours during which they are seldom allowed bathroom breaks; they are paid about 18 cents per shirt, which is later sold for \$20 each. Mandarin makes clothes for the Gap, J. Crew, and Eddie Bauer.

In Haiti, women sewing clothing at Disney's contract plants are paid 6 cents for every \$19.99 *Dainians* outfit they sew; they make 33 cents an hour. Meanwhile, Disney makes record profits and could easily pay workers a living wage for less than one half of 1 percent of the sales price of one outfit. In Vietnam, 90 percent of Nike's workers are females between the ages of 15 and 28. Nike's labor for a pair of basketball shoes (which retail for \$149.50) costs Nike \$1.50, 1 percent of the retail price.¹⁴

The executives of US multinationals defend such low wages as higher than those the workers would otherwise receive. Another argument is that the wages the multinationals pay are, at least, a living wage—that is, a wage sufficient to meet the subsistence needs of a family. But such claims, particularly the second one, are not always true. Other statistics compiled by Burn revealed, for example, that in the 1990s Nicaraguan sweatshop workers earned in the range of \$55 to \$75 a month—less than half of the \$165 a month their families needed to meet their most basic needs.¹⁵ To be sure, some multinationals do pay their workers—female and male—living wages, but they seem to be more the exception than the rule, according to Burn.

Disturbed by the situation just described, contemporary socialist feminists have recently taken a lead in trying to improve not only pay but working conditions in sweatshops. Some of the strategies they have used involve the unionization of workers (even more difficult to achieve in today's developing nations than it was in the early days of union organizing in the United States) and consumer boycotts of sweatshop imports.¹⁶

Another phenomenon that concerns not only contemporary socialist feminists but also other types of feminists is the number of women who migrate from poor countries to do care work in rich countries. For example, in the United States, most elder-care workers who do home-based care are

either native-born women of color or female migrant workers. Ron Hoppe, founder of WorldWide HealthStaff Associates, pointed out that maids in America, especially men, are not much interested in working for his company, which cannot pay its employees any more than fast-food businesses do. Most of the people willing to work for him are migrants, many of them from "caring" cultures and all of them accustomed to working long hours for less money than Americans expect.¹⁷

Relying on migrant women to do low-paid care work seems to be the order of the day. No matter how poor a country is, if there is a country poorer than that country may be a source of female caregivers willing to work for very low wages. Countries high up on the economic ladder see little reason not to rely on poor countries to supply them with care workers. For example, in the United Kingdom, 35 percent of the nurses who work in the elder-care environment are migrants, and most of them work for low wages. In London, more than 60 percent of the people who do elder-care work are migrants.¹⁸ These workers, nearly exclusively women, come from Zimbabwe, Poland, Nigeria, the Philippines, and India. Their employers like their "work ethic" and their "warmth, respect, empathy, trust, and patience in the relationship."¹⁹ They also like the fact that these people are willing to work for wages that native-born elder-care workers would find outrageously low.

Like the United Kingdom, Taiwan has an exceptionally high demand for migrant care workers. Since the early 1980s, significant numbers of undocumented migrant women have worked in Taiwanese households, thereby enabling Taiwanese women in the paid workforce to keep their jobs. Comments Pei-Chia Lan, "The filial duty of serving aging parents is transferred first from the son to the daughter-in-law (a gender transfer), then is outsourced to migrant care workers (a gender transfer)."²⁰ Later, it is pressure, the Taiwanese government decided to document large numbers of migrant care workers. Specifically, in 1992, Taiwan started to grant work permits to "domestic caretakers" who agreed to care for severely ill or disabled people, children under the age of twelve, or elders over the age of sixty. Moreover, it began to describe the importation of care workers from the Philippines and Indonesia in particular "as a solution to the growing demand for paid care work among both nuclear households and the aging population."²¹

In addition to taking advantage of female migrant care workers' willingness to work for low wages, rich countries often fail to acknowledge the difficulties of care they create in poor countries. Families of female migrant care workers suffer a loss of care from their own mothers, daughters, and sisters. Women leave their children and/or their elderly parents behind, to be cared for in makeshift ways, and doctors and nurses from developing countries

leave their posts for high-paying jobs in developed countries, thereby weakening the already fragile health-care system of their respective native lands.²⁴

Critiques of Marxist and Socialist Feminisms

Critique One: Marxist Feminism Provides an Unsatifying Analysis of Women's Oppression

Arguably, classical or strict Marxist feminists believe that the overthrow of capitalism will bring equality between men and women. This belief, held by Evelyn Reed, was discredited by many Russian feminists after the Communist Russian Revolution of 1917. Feminist critics were quick to point out that the entrance of women into the productive workforce brought them neither economic independence nor a view of themselves as self-confident, purposeful agents. Rather than meaningful, high-wage employment, most Russian women found in the workplace dronelike, exhausting work that was typically less valued than men's work. Not wanting to jeopardize Communist plans to totally destroy capitalism, most Marxist feminists kept quiet publicly about their employment situation. However, in private they complained about such workplace disadvantages as (1) the relegation of most women to low-status "women's work" (i.e., secretarial work, rote factory work, and service work, including jobs related to cooking, cleaning, and attending to the basic needs of the young, the old, and the infirm), (2) the creation of "female professions" and "male professions," (3) the payment of lower wages to women than to men, and (4) the treatment of women as a "colossal reserve of labor forces" to use or not use, depending on the state's need for workers.²⁵

Critique Two: Socialist Feminism Needs to Be More "Materialistic"

Concerned by Juliet Mitchell's turn to the theories of psychoanalysis for a better explanation of women's oppression than standard socialism can provide, some socialist feminists insisted on the need to return to more traditional Marxist concerns.²⁶ A socialism that fails to look at the concrete and specific material ways in which women are oppressed does not motivate people outside the intellectual bastions of the academy to demand equality with men as their right, they said. Indeed, Stevi Jackson recently wrote that only a return to materialism can save socialist feminism from undeserved neglect:

A materialist analysis is as relevant now as it ever was. While accepting that traditional Marxists had little to say about gender divisions,

that one theory cannot explain the whole of human life, the method of analysis Marx left us remains useful. There are good reasons why materialist perspectives remain necessary to grapple with the complexities of a postcolonial world, with the intersections of gender, ethnicity, and nationality. It seems evident that the material foundations and consequences of institutionalized racism, the heritages of centuries of slavery, colonialism and imperialism and the continued international division of labour are at least as important as culturally constructed difference. We live our lives now within a global system characterized by extremely stark material inequalities. The continued vitality of approaches which deal with such inequalities is crucial for feminist politics and theory.¹²²

Jackson's point is compelling not only for socialist feminists but for all feminists—indecisive, all human beings.

Conclusion

Although Marxist and socialist feminisms are not as popular today as in their 1970s heyday, they continue to provide insight into women's condition. In other words, the failure of communism and dismantling of the former Soviet Union does not render all types of Marxist and socialist feminism irrelevant. On the contrary, said Nancy Holmstrom,

the socialist feminist project is more pressing than ever. . . . The brutal economic realities of globalization impact everyone across the globe—but women are affected disproportionately. Displaced by economic changes, women bear a greater burden of labor throughout the world as social services have been cut, whether in response to structural adjustment plans in the third world or to so-called welfare reform in the United States. Women have been forced to migrate, are subject to trafficking, and are the proletarians of the newly industrializing countries. On top of all this they continue to be subject to sexual violence and in much of the world are not allowed to control their own processes of reproduction. How should we understand these phenomena and, more importantly, how do we go about changing them? *Feminist theory that is lost in theoretical abstractions or that deprecates economic realities will be useless for this purpose.* Feminism that speaks of women's oppression and its injustice but fails to address capitalism will be of little help in ending women's oppression. . . . Socialist feminism is the approach with the greatest capacity to illuminate the exploitation and oppression of most of the women of the world.¹²³

Only when women earn as much as men for the same job, have equal status in the workplace, and do no more than their fair share of domestic work will Marxist and socialist feminist take a rest. This day is not likely to come soon, however, if we look at women's condition worldwide. Poverty remains a major issue for millions of women globally, and it will take enormous social, political, and cultural changes to alter the status quo. Importantly, more and more contemporary Marxist and socialist feminists are engaging in intersectional thinking. For example, Barbara Ehrenreich, a socioeconomically advantaged, well-educated, white woman, adopted the "material life conditions of a poor woman."¹²⁴ In *Nickel and Dimed: Or (Not) Getting By in America*, Ehrenreich revealed the issues that preoccupy women who work for minimum wages to be quite different from those that bother well-heeled women.¹²⁵ Viewing women differentially according to their class helps Marxist and socialist feminists clarify the different ways in which rich and poor women are oppressed in capitalist countries.

Questions for Discussion

1. Discuss some tangible examples of how human beings "create themselves" through collective production. How does the capitalist mode of production impact women's historical and modern experiences?
2. Do you believe women constitute a class in the Marxist sense? Weigh the similarities and differences between bourgeois and proletarian women. Consider the benefits and drawbacks of viewing all women as belonging to a single class.
3. Explain the four Marxist forms of alienation. Are women more or less alienated than men? Examine forms of alienation involving women's self-concepts, relationships, careers, and political representation.
4. What concerns did women laborers raise after the Russian Revolution? What were the concerns of those women involved with implementing material solutions to their issues complementary? Speculate about the sexual division of labor. Why do you think male-dominated careers tend to be valued more (monetarily and, arguably, socially) than female-dominated careers? Could the "worth point" system resolve such disparities, or is such a system still subjective? In what other ways might we mediate arbitrary valuation of work?