**SOME SUGGESTIONS FOR UNDERSTANDING THE SEXUAL DIVISION OF LABOR AND WHAT PAID AND UNPAID DOMESTIC WORK MEANS FOR WOMEN IN LATIN AMERICA**

***Introduction***

This document builds on CARE’s strategic focus in Latin America on the sexual division of labor (with a particular focus on paid and unpaid domestic work). It provides:

* Joint analysis developed by women’s organizations in the diverse country contexts of Latin America.
* Theoretical contributions from participants in the Gender Program Learning Workshop, March 2011 as well as a literature review
* Life stories and conceptual and political reflections contributed by participants at the Workshop.

***What is the sexual division of labor and what impact does it have on men and women?***

Throughout history gender relations have been defined with specific roles, attributes and spaces for men and women. In each society, economic, social and cultural factors influence the definition of these roles. Women predominantly play domestic or ‘reproductive’ roles and men public or ‘productive’ roles. Society has also attributed different values to these roles and in general, the dominance of patriarchal and capitalist norms means that:

*The reproductive or domestic sphere*: relates to the organization and attention to family and home, they are not commercial. They are therefore less valued and are not exchanged for money.

*The productive or public sector*: relates to the economic, political and social. This space is available and awarded to date largely to and by men. It is commercial, and therefore, has monetary value.

Clear separation between the public and domestic spheres developed. The productive public spheres are masculine; they generate wealth and are visible. They are valued by society and provide personal independence. Reproductive work has been feminized, does not generate wealth, and is socially invisible and unrecognized. It does not provide personal independence. It is considered secondary. Women’s work therefore has always been invisible, even though women have always contributed to the productive and reproductive work force in societies.

Women’s increasing role in the productive work force without any fundamental shifts in the division of labor in the reproductive or domestic sphere has resulted in grave consequences for women including overwork, job insecurity, and a reduction in their ability to participate fully in society.

The impact of these patriarchal and capitalist norms can be summarized at the following levels:

1. **An individual woman’s well-being**: women are assigned roles in the private sphere, caring for family and dependents. This creates an additional work load for women, which in turn affects her quality of life, her work, her leisure time, her health, her access to education and other opportunities.
2. **In the labor market**: women who work in the labor market do so in conditions of inequality and segregation. Traditional jobs for women reflect their socially assigned roles; these jobs are often undervalued and paid less. Women receive lower salaries for the same jobs as men. This discrimination is often linked with other forms of discrimination such as class, ethnicity or origin.
3. **At macro-economic level**: the workforce originates from the domestic sphere which is built by women. The “homo economic” goes to work smart, rested and fed by women. Hence women contribute to the macro-economy and the generation of money in their unpaid domestic work. The value of women’s domestic work to national economies has not been adequately studied, analyzed or communicated.

These three levels need to be taken into account if we are to imagine an alternative economic system that is inclusive of women; that addresses the distribution and value of time and resources and that links the financial economy to the care economy.

***The concept of work from a gender perspective***

In classic economics, work is equated with employment; this obscures the links between reproductive work and capitalist economy. Families are generally seen solely as consumers of goods, obscuring the important work that happens in families and contributes to society. It is estimated that over half of all work by the world’s population is domestic work (Carrasco, 2007: 157). From a gender perspective, men and women’s work is made up of both income generating activities and work which does not generate income in the household and communities. They are both as important as each for individuals, families and broader society.

***Domestic reproductive and ‘caring’ work, the basis of life***

Caring for humans being requires both the production of goods and services and emotions and relationships. From this perspective, human needs have a more objective dimension – the biological – and a more subjective dimension – which relates to emotion, psychology, security and relations. Both are equally important to human life. Caring for people in the domestic sphere differs socially and emotionally from paid work, it is difficult to directly value it in terms of market productivity since it creates human relations which form the basis of society itself.

***Why is domestic work invisible?***

To understand the answer to this question, it is important to understand patriarchal and capitalist systems. Patriarchal systems undervalue all that is not related to action, values, processes and work that stem from men’s power and in the public sphere. Similarly, capitalist systems obscure the relationship between domestic work and capitalist production because in so doing they shift some of the costs of production to the domestic sphere.

Research suggests that it is impossible to cover the reproductive work that provides the work force to a society with a salary (in fact reproductive work cannot be totally provided for in the market). So in fact the capitalist system is subsidized by the domestic sphere. Capitalist production has created itself as an apparently parallel and independent process to the caring for human life. Humans in the capitalist system are simply the means to an end: profitability.

***The struggle and search for women’s identity and autonomy challenges both the capitalist and patriarchal system***

The traditional roles of women as home makers, taking care of men who in turn are the salaried citizens and workers has been fundamentally challenged by the increasing presence of women in the workforce. At the same time, institutions and society have changed very little; this tension is shouldered by women who still carry out the majority of the domestic work which continues to be undervalued in the capitalist system. Systemic change has not taken place, for example, working hours have not shifted for working men and women in relation to the care of children or class schedules. As a result women themselves (and usually alone) face the challenge of negotiating their domestic and working lives; it has required women to develop new forms of coping, doing less domestic work; employing domestic workers and juggling their working lives. This ‘dual work’ or ‘dual presence’ or more recently dubbed ‘duel presence/absence’ which signifies the fact that women are both present and not present in both work and home because of the social expectations upon her, puts her in a position to have to make constant compromises, to make tough decisions and manage tensions that men do not face and that renders women permanently ill at ease in a system constructed by men.

***Hierarchies in housework***

While all household members play a role in domestic work, women do the most of it and are often seen to be responsible for it. Men might play a role, but often ‘helping’ rather than organizing. This is particularly true when it comes to care work, which continues to be unrecognized as a contribution to society and to the economy. So hierarchies within households also reflect broad social hierarchies of male dominance over women or patriarchy. Social differences of class and ethnicity also play out in these hierarchies. In Latin America (and globally), the issue of paid domestic work is an example of this and demonstrates how societal systems play out and are duplicated in power relations between men and women, different classes and ethnicities at household level. As more middle income women participate in the productive sphere, relations shift and adapt within the household, and more often than not they conform to broader societal and (in our countries) post-colonial norms.

While paid domestic work is recognized in national economies, data is scarce in terms of its relationship with female employment levels. Working conditions and the lack of legislation relating to this sector show that that it is undervalued and in many of our societies women who work outside the home employ other women domestically, whether to free themselves to work in the productive sphere or simply to free them from doing work that is considered inferior.

***Priorities for life***

When prioritizing between sustainable human life and economic benefit, our patriarchal and capitalist societies have opted for the latter. People are not the focus; they are simply a means of production. Social interests are secondary to production and profit. This is evidenced in recent policies to deregulate the labor market which reduced wages and working time in order to adapt to demands for improved efficiency and productively – with negative effects of people’s quality of life. So societies value macro-economics, the productive and public sphere; sustaining human life is relegated to the private sphere and understood as a woman’s role. The issue, therefore, of domestic work is not simply a technical one; it is a political and social issue.

When viewed this way, the sexual division of labor is at the heart of women’s subordination and relates to the ways in which women are brought into the labor market, particularly women who are poor, excluded, marginalized or discriminated against. These female workers are often employed in precarious conditions.

***Precarious working conditions for female paid workers***

The precarious nature of work and its increasing precariousness is evidenced in new forms of employment (such as outsourcing, short term work or service contracts); which shifting times and locations for work (flexible working hours, tele-working); with intensified production demands; subtle job requirements (the personal touch, good looks); and with wage cuts and reduction of contractual protection.

Two groups who are particularly affected that the Latin America region has looked at are paid domestic workers and workers in the flower industry.[[1]](#footnote-1) However, there are no doubt many other formal and informal sectors where conditions are increasingly precarious which can be looked at on a country by country basis.

***What can development actors and the women’s movement do to support processes of change***

If we are to shift the oppressive, discriminatory and dominant nature of the sexual division of labor, it will require broader socio-cultural change. It requires a development model that has at its core human welfare and rejects the idea that the market should prevail, a model that aims to generate co-responsibility between the family (in its broadest sense), the community, the society, the market and the State. These changes will not be immediate and we should be looking for ‘adaptive’ changes (according to UN Women) that bring progressive change particularly in policies that lessen women’s workload in the domestic sphere.

It is clear however, from our analysis above, that focusing on women specific activities to help them deal with their workload is not a good enough solution, since it does not question the prevailing economic model. What is more likely to work are policies that enhance the links between ‘productive’ employment and domestic (reproductive) work especially targeting men and programs that give visibility to and value the domestic sphere. But of course gender equity will not simply be achieved through policy change, it will also require that people debate and discuss the issues relating to shifting relations within families, communities, society, the market and the state and come up with alternative economic models that are more just and equitable and work for the well-being of all.

Here are some ideas about what we can do to contribute to change:

* Research into women’s experience in a given context – how they participate in the work force and how they manage their work and domestic spheres; exploring what might make their experience easier and at the same time might challenge the existing economic model.
* Highlighting the contribution and work of indigenous women in the region, particularly their contribution to the protection of history, the environment, culture and ensuring a safe place for past, present and future generations to flourish. This could be done specifically from an intercultural and indigenous people’s perspective.
* Studies/data on time use could be used to give us ideas about how to highlight how women’s domestic work contributes to national economies.
* Targeting changes that enhance co-responsibility within families, community and State so that women can define their own contributions and enter into the productive sphere with equal rights. Accompanying women’s rights organizations as they advocate for these changes.
* Strengthening spaces for debate and discussion so that men and women can create and define desired changes for the short and long term, and can influence policies at local, national and international level. In so doing we can jointly question the capitalist and patriarchal system and enable women in solidarity to bring about socio-cultural change.

1. A review of these sectors and the “community mothers program” in Peru and Ecuador is available separately and in Spanish (please contact Miryam Moya: Miriam.moya@lacrmu.care.org) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)