

## REVIEW ESSAYS

### The Home as a Workplace: Deconstructing Dichotomies

EILEEN BORIS\*

The ideological split between home and work obscures the ways that each realm shapes the other. Contemporary political debate over the wage-earning mother maintains an opposition between “mother” and “worker”. This division reflects a pervasive intellectual impasse pervading the organization of knowledge, our very scholarship, as well as legal rules and governmental regulations. History – including women’s history and labor history – is no exception to such dichotomous thought. “Separate spheres” or “the cult of domesticity” long has dominated scholarship on US women in the nineteenth century, even though most women hardly could stay work-free in a protected home environment. Few men write women’s history; few women focus on collective bargaining or industrial relations. Family law and employment law exist as separate fields. Women’s labor history even stands apart from labor history, with the woman worker a subset of the worker who, as sociologist Ava Baron has shown, is constructed as male.<sup>1</sup>

Historians of women’s labor, of women in the workplace, offer insights that help us dissolve dichotomy, and go beyond the realms of home and work, to understand their fundamental connection and interpenetration. We have broken down dichotomy by questioning what is work and who is a worker. Our deconstructions and reconstructions have turned permeable the boundary between home and work. The exploration of women’s work in the home has been central to the larger feminist project of dissolving the dichotomy of public and private, the ideological division of “work” and “home” as separate spheres that engenders the first as “male” and the second as “female”. This essay considers the home as a workspace for women – for unpaid as well as paid labor,

\* I would like to thank participants in seminars at the Belle van Zuylen Instituut, University of Amsterdam, The Netherlands; Women’s Studies, University of Sussex, Great Britain; and Women’s Research Group, University of Joensuu, Finland.

<sup>1</sup> I cover some of the issues addressed in this paper also in the review essay, “Beyond Dichotomy: North American Women’s Labor History”, *Journal of Women’s History*, 4 (Winter 1993), pp. 162–179. See also, Linda Kerber, “Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman’s Place: The Rhetoric of Women’s History”, *Journal of American History*, 75 (June 1988), pp. 9–39; Ava Baron, “Gender and Labor History”, in Ava Baron (ed.), *Work Engendered: Toward a New History of American Labor* (Ithaca and London, 1991), pp. 1–46.

for her own family but also for the families of others. By historicizing and concretizing the relation of home to work, we can advance our understandings of the ways that reproduction, social reproduction, and production intertwine in the everyday lives of women and men from different classes and racial/ethnic groups. By naming home-based activities "work", we expose the gendered nature of the categories through which scholarship reconstructs the world.<sup>2</sup>

By considering unpaid labor as labor, we have transformed the definition of work to include family and community labor devalued under capitalist industrialization: housework, child and dependent care, sex/affective production, voluntary activities – what socialist feminists have theorized as social reproduction, those services that maintain people daily and intergenerationally. In doing so, we have stretched the spaces of labor from the factory or shop floor to include the home, family and neighborhood. The worker no longer appears as the blue-collar male proletarian, the steelmaker, dock worker or auto assembler, but also his wife, daughter, sister who clean and cook as well as earn wages in "women's work", as seamstresses, domestics, typists, jobs that extend caretaking and household labor from the home to other spaces. This redefinition of the worker also belongs to the evolving study of white-collar, pink-collar, and no collar occupations: the secretary, insurance saleslady, waitress, child care provider, enslaved field hand (on the mostly female trash gang), or migrant laborer.<sup>3</sup>

Studies of housework, both unpaid for the family and paid as a domestic servant, are transforming not only our definition of work but also the meaning of what historians have considered to be larger social forces like industrialization or the making of the welfare state. By housework, I mean cooking, cleaning, laundry, gardening, sewing, shopping, and related labor around a living space; the components of housework change over time and differ among social classes. These activities stand distinct from but often are performed by the same person who cares for dependents, especially children. Making housework part of labor history obliterates the notion of separate spheres.

Historian Jeanne Boydston has shown "women's unpaid domestic labor as a central force in the emergence of an industrialized society in the northeastern United States". Industrialization and mechanization reorganized not only paid labor, but also work in and for the home and family, which further responded to shifts in other workplaces. Factories, mills,

<sup>2</sup> For a parallel project to locate labor history in terms of production and reproduction as seen in the law, see Christopher Tomlins, "Law and Authority As Subjects in Labor History", *International Labor and Working Class History*, forthcoming.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Sharon Hartman Strom, *Beyond the Typewriter* (Urbana, 1992); Dorothy Sue Cobble, *Dishing It Out* (Urbana, 1991); Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I A Woman? Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York, 1985); Jacqueline Jones, *The Dispossessed* (New York, 1992).

mines and later offices removed the labor of husbands and older children from the household. Consumer products developed, including new technologies for the home itself. Thus the pace, structure, and skills of housework underwent a shift that robbed many women of traditional knowledge as they found both their raw materials and tools changed.<sup>4</sup>

There was – and continues to be – much labor involved in the household. During the course of the nineteenth century, new technologies would make housework easier but increased standards of cleanliness and extent of offered services (needed more clothes, cleaner clothes, more elaborate meals, more decorated and thus dustier parlors). As early as 1810, the process for canning food existed; in the 1820s, gas lighting opened up the evening to productive activity, as well as recreation. The sewing machine became “invented” in 1846. By the last decades of the century, hundreds of conveniences for heating, lighting, cleaning and cooking lessened sheer physical labor. Housewifery may have become deskilled in the process, but drudgery became transformed. A more complex process occurred that meant gains and losses but mostly transformations until the late twentieth century. Now the ability to prepare from scratch a multi-course meal belongs to the realm of leisure, hobby, and gourmet cooking among time-poor and convenience food-rich households.<sup>5</sup>

The home remains a place of work, a generator of use values in the Marxist sense, but the valuing, in an ideational sense, of women’s household labors had lessened even prior to industrialization, perhaps before the American Revolution. Value possessed a different meaning with the growth of the market economy and the linkage of (white) men with money, which was turning into the major symbol of economic activity. These changes connected to developing gender ideologies to undermine the concept of “woman” as “worker”. Boydston claims that housewifery lost status because “women’s social subordination” began to “determine their economic status”; “a gender *division* of labor” turned into a “gendered *definition* of labor”.<sup>6</sup>

White women of the middle and upper class became defined as mothers; unpaid family labor no longer appeared as work. The idealiza-

<sup>4</sup> Jeanne Boydston, *Home and Work: Housework, Wages, and the Ideology of the Early Republic* (New York, 1992), p. xi; Glenna Matthews, *“Just a Housewife”: The Rise and Fall of Domesticity in America* (New York, 1987).

<sup>5</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich and Deidre English, “The Manufacture of Housework”, *Socialist Revolution*, 5 (Oct.–Dec. 1975), pp. 5–41; Mary Romero, *Maid in the U.S.A.* (New York and London, 1992); Susan Strasser, *Never Done: A History of American Housework* (New York, 1981); Ruth Schwartz Cowan, *More Work for Mother: The Ironies of Household Technology from the Open Hearth to the Microwave* (New York, 1983); Dolores Hayden, *The Grand Domestic Revolution: A History of Feminist Design for American Homes, Neighborhoods, and Cities* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981).

<sup>6</sup> Bonnie Fox (ed.), *Hidden in the Household: Women’s Domestic Labor Under Capitalism* (Toronto, 1980); Boydston, *Home and Work*, p. 55.

tion of motherhood further separated nurturing tasks and dependent care from work. Wage labor belonged to the ideal worker who was a man, or one who did not do housework, care for children, and engage in the other forms of unpaid family labor that were constituting mothers' lives. Mothers were to nurture children; it was appropriate to delegate physical labor of the household to others but not emotional or intellectual tasks.<sup>7</sup>

If we were to write a history of motherwork, we would then look at the urban bourgeois white household of the first half of the nineteenth century as a benchmark: from motherwork integrated with all sorts of household manufacturing to motherwork becoming narrowed to child nurture and household management – a process that took more than a century. At the close of the twentieth century, we may very well be entering another period, of motherwork combined with wage labor as the norm, with differential impacts: for professional women who choose their jobs and earn resources to purchase dependent care and household labor, independence; for wage-earning mothers who feel they need to earn to maintain family income but who find their job is just a job and its paycheck barely adequate, a stretch out of the working day and a resentment against poor women who up to now have been able to stay at home and care for their children while receiving welfare or state subsidy. That most women are earners, no matter their family status, doing what a class-based women's movement considered emancipatory, has stigmatized further welfare recipients. Support from the state becomes judged as dependency and workfare schemes abound to replace welfare "as we have known it", further devaluing motherwork but offering inadequate substitutes for it.<sup>8</sup>

A century ago, the economic (as well as emotional and physical) dependency of the middle-class, usually white, housewife had been the ideal; the dependency of poor women on charity or welfare generated condemnation. What has shifted is the solution: from remarriage or a begrudging small payment to the deserving solo mother, encouragement of marriage appears as a minor theme. The right-wing version has economic penalties for children out of wedlock but incentives if a mother on Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) marries; the left-wing version provides for jobs for men so they will marry the mothers of their children, as if it worked that way. But more often, policy-makers call for mothers to become wage earners without providing

<sup>7</sup> Tamara K. Hareven, "The Home and the Family in Historical Perspective", *Social Research*, 58 (Spring 1991), pp. 253–285.

<sup>8</sup> Molly Ladd-Taylor, *Mother-Work: Women, Child Welfare, and the State, 1890–1930* (Urbana, 1994); Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of *Dependency*: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State", *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 19 (Winter 1994), pp. 309–336.

adequate child care or training. Some feminists are suggesting that universal child care replace welfare.<sup>9</sup>

In contrast to the North, the household remained the center of production in the plantation South. As Elizabeth Fox-Genovese has shown, the boundaries of the household stretched from the big house through the slave cabins and the poultry yard into the fields beyond, much as it had for the seventeenth-century New England "goodwives" whose lives Laurel Thatcher Ulrich has uncovered. The mistress managed work for the family as well as the social reproduction of the enslaved workforce through care of the sick and the cutting of clothing. But in the rice plantations and elsewhere, slave women had to produce their own food and make their own clothing after finishing the day's task. Enslaved people themselves became responsible for social reproduction, exploding as myth the paternalism of the planter class, the notion of the master as a father provider.<sup>10</sup>

Along the frontier or borderlands, household production existed longer, sometimes even retaining status and power for women. Sarah Deutsch has demonstrated in her study of Chicanas in northern New Mexico that a rich village life centered on women's production for the household of necessary goods and services; women owned land and sheep, grew vegetables and made clothes and pottery. This power brought status and persisted into the early twentieth century when migratory strategies undermined women's economic contribution to the household and control over family resources. For native American women, the domestic realm could coexist with the polity as well as the economy; certainly it was a space for women's rituals and cooperative labor but also stood as the site from which women resisted colonization even when their men accepted the offerings of Christian missionaries as a means towards economic survival.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> Nancy Folbre, "The Unproductive Housewife: Her Evolution in Nineteenth-Century Economic Thought", *ibid.*, 16 (Summer 1991), pp. 463-484; Fraser and Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency"; William Julius Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago, 1987); Christopher Jencks, *Rethinking Social Policy: Race, Poverty, and the Underclass* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992); Charles Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950-1980* (New York, 1984). Feminist debate on this issue takes place on the internet network connected to the journal, *Social Politics*.

<sup>10</sup> Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, *Within the Plantation Household: Black and White Women of the Old South* (Chapel Hill, 1988); Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, *Good Wives* (New York, 1981); Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1985), pp. 3-35; White, *Ar'n't I A Woman?*

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Deutsch, *No Separate Refuge: Culture, Class, and Gender on an Anglo-Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940* (New York, 1987); Carol Devens, *Countering Colonization: Native American Women and Great Lakes Missions, 1630-1900* (Berkeley, 1992).

To whatever extent elite women experienced the home as separate from work, then, this division did not exist for the enslaved or the laboring poor – unable to be true women because they worked outside the home and/or for wages. Women of the laboring poor devised strategies to meet their reproductive needs that combined paid and unpaid work. These ranged from producing essential commodities themselves – making bread from scratch instead of buying it, keeping gardens or chickens when they could, sewing clothes – to scavenging the streets (or sending their children to do so) for raw materials, keeping boarders, bringing in industrial homework, selling homemade food or other items on the streets, prostitution (of themselves or their daughters), begging, and borrowing neighbors' time or resources. Networking or kinwork under poverty provided economic resources as well as emotional ones.<sup>12</sup>

Mothering under the conditions of chattel slavery, segregated emancipation, or growing impoverishment not only proved difficult but became evidence of unfitness. Authorities removed children of working mothers to resocialize them, americanizing them in the case of immigrants as well as indigenous peoples, whose foreign ways and poverty made it impossible for them to meet the “American” standard of living. Schools – a place where some of the tasks of mothering occur – taught girls to separate food, to reject the stews of their mothers; girls instructed in home economics questioned their mothers' old world ways. Girls from Plains tribes learned housekeeping at boarding schools; this training proved more beneficial for those who employed them as servants than their own families whose reservation homes and customary ways stood in sharp contrast to the Anglo norm. During Reconstruction, for another example, African American children were apprenticed away from their mothers who were judged unfit because they had had the children outside of marriage even though slaves had not been permitted to marry.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Christine Stansell, *City of Women: Sex and Class in New York, 1789–1860* (Urbana, 1987); Ardis Cameron, *Radicals of the Worst Sort: Laboring Women in Lawrence, Massachusetts, 1860–1912* (Urbana, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> Stephanie Shaw, “Mothering Under Slavery in the Antebellum South”, in Evelyn Nakano Glenn, Grace Chang and Linda Rennie Forcey (eds), *Mothering: Ideology, Experience, and Agency* (New York and London, 1994), pp. 237–258; on working-class mothers, see note 12 above; George J. Sanchez, “‘Go After the Women’: Americanization and the Mexican Immigrant Woman, 1915–1929”, in Ellen Carol DuBois and Vicki L. Ruiz (eds), *Unequal Sisters: A Multi-Cultural Reader in U.S. Women's History* (1st ed., New York and London, 1990), pp. 250–263; Robert A. Trennert, “Educating Indian Girls at Nonreservation Boarding Schools, 1878–1920”, in *ibid.*, pp. 224–237; Rebecca J. Scott, “The Battle over the Child: Child Apprenticeship and the Freedmen's Bureau in North Carolina”, in N. Ray Hiner and Joseph M. Hawes (eds), *Growing Up in America in Historical Perspective* (Urbana, 1985), pp. 193–207. On intervention into immigrant families, Linda Gordon, *Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Politics and History of Family Violence* (New York, 1988).

Slavery, of course, provided the most trying circumstances for mothering. Not only were the physical conditions often harsh, but the threat of the child being torn from the breast, with either mother or child sold for a profit, loomed over the enslaved mother. Infant mortality was high and pregnancy difficult since most masters and overseers refused to believe the pregnancy of enslaved women until the woman showed. A confirmed pregnancy might mean more calories but certainly not the nutrition necessary for this aspect of motherwork. And pregnancy did not keep enslaved women from whipping or punishment, even though reproduction was a form of production for the master's profit, even if the fetus had resulted from the rape of a black woman by a white man.<sup>14</sup> In the tangled sexual relations that hovered in a realm between terrorism and consent, we see the most ominous meaning of motherwork, the production of people for profit. That surrogate mothering today is a paid form of motherwork that blurs the line between baby selling, adoption, and private sexual contracts reminds us that women's wombs remain a place of work and not only for herself.<sup>15</sup>

Enslaved women often had to breastfeed the children of their mistresses sometimes at the expense of their own. But historians have uncovered cases of white mistresses breastfeeding slave babies to keep them alive. Indeed, one study by Sally McMillan has shown that women shared their milk with kin and neighbors to nurture babies whose mothers died in childbirth or who could not nurse for any number of reasons. In a period before sterile formula, another woman's milk was the best insurance of infant survival. Toddler deaths occurred most often during summer when milk supplies spoiled from heat and insects. Wet nurse is a non-familial version of breastfeeding, one component of motherwork.<sup>16</sup>

We often neglect the biological elements of motherwork, pregnancy but even more breastfeeding, because of our emphasis on the social construction of womanhood. Women breastfed in the United States through the 1930s; the practice declined between 1940 and 1970, even though the majority of mothers remained in the home rather than other workplaces during this period. At the nadir, only 25 per cent breastfed at birth, with only 10 per cent after the early weeks. A combination of scientific motherhood and medicalization of childbirth, as well as collu-

<sup>14</sup> Shaw, "Mothering Under Slavery"; John Campbell, "Work, Pregnancy, and Infant Mortality among Southern Slaves", *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 14 (Spring 1984), pp. 793–812.

<sup>15</sup> On surrogacy, see for example, Martha Field, *Surrogate Motherhood* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988).

<sup>16</sup> Sally McMillan, "Mothers' Sacred Duty: Breast-feeding Patterns among Middle and Upper Class Women in the Antebellum South", *Journal of Southern History*, 51 (August 1985), pp. 333–356; Nancy Schrom Dye and Daniel Blake Smith, "Mother Love and Infant Death, 1750–1920", *Journal of American History*, 73 (1986), pp. 329–353.

sion between doctors and the formula industry, generated this change. With the rise of feminism, and its challenge to medicalization of women's bodies, slightly more than half of all mothers breastfed at birth by 1989. But full-time workers outside of the home were likely to discontinue before other mothers. According to sociologist Linda M. Blum, "the interdependent breastfeeding relationship heightens the contradictions of mothering promoted by late capitalist restructuring." Workplaces are not organized for nursing (no mandatory maternity leaves, scarce on-site nurseries, no mandatory nursing breaks, rigid control of time in low-skilled women's work in clerical and service industries). They assume bodily integrity and autonomy, qualities that breastfeeding mothers lack but some feminists have demanded, even as other feminists were calling for women's control of motherwork and rejecting a male model as the essence of equality. These "difference" or special treatment feminists call for a redesigning of the workplace and of social life to take account of women's life experiences while making it possible for women to choose what those life experiences would be. Only more privileged women today can continue to breastfeed, because they have a male wage to rely upon so they can afford to leave the labor market or because they have flexibility on their job. Poor women and single mothers, disproportionately women of color, have fewer choices: perhaps stigmatized welfare or give up breastfeeding and child nurture to return to the paid labor force.<sup>17</sup>

For domestic servants, home and domesticity hardly stood as spheres separated from the world of work; indeed, by performing such labor for someone else, they often neglected their own homes. Sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn has explained, "the situation of women as unpaid reproductive workers at home is inextricably bound to that of women as paid reproductive workers." The leisure, status, and even labor – child nurture, entertaining, spousal companionship – of the mistress exists because of the maid; the status of white women interweaves with that of women of color. The home shifts its meaning depending on one's standpoint: whether a woman does her own cleaning or cleans another woman's house, whether she is an employer of domestic labor or also a reformer attempting to set standards for it.<sup>18</sup>

What was homemaking for the mistress was work for the maid. Historian Phyllis Palmer shows that legal consequences emerged from the inability to break through "powerful images of domesticity with a

<sup>17</sup> Linda M. Blum, "Mothers, Babies, and Breastfeeding in Late Capitalist America: The Shifting Contexts of Feminist Theory", *Feminist Studies*, 19 (Summer 1993), pp. 291–311; on equality and difference among feminists, Lise Vogel, *Mothers on the Job: Maternity Policy in the U.S. Workplace* (New Brunswick, NJ, 1993).

<sup>18</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor", *Signs: A Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 18 (August 1992), pp. 1–42.

vision of the home as workplace." Servants failed to gain coverage under New Deal labor legislation. Social Security and the Fair Labor Standards Act excluded domestics and agricultural labor, occupations dominated by women and men of color. Racism and the greed of employers – of more privileged women usually of another race – played their part in placing the prime work of African American and other women of color outside the law.<sup>19</sup>

Many women have performed domestic tasks in other environments. Chinese women, for example, worked in family businesses like laundries and restaurants, usually without a wage. The family might live in the back or above the business, a combination of home and work also seen among Jewish shopkeepers along the East Coast. Mexican women labored as washerwomen in commercial laundries, as did African Americans, and as cooks, dishwashers, maids and waitresses in hotels and other public establishments. Women in migrant agricultural labor, often from Mexico, brought their homes to the fields and had to put up with the shacks provided by growers; so did tenant farmers and sharecroppers.<sup>20</sup> This spatial relation needs more exploration. We know, for example, how domestic service itself shifted from live-in to day work when African American women in the North replaced immigrant girls in the 1920s. For like their Southern counterparts, one's own home served as a counterpoint, the harbinger of a personal and dignified identity, not always available on the job.<sup>21</sup>

Today, the domestic belongs to the service sector as a household worker, janitress, nurses' aide, cafeteria cook, and other low level laborer, increasingly employed by contract-out firms, still without social security, health insurance, or other employment benefits or labor standards. In the late twentieth century, reproduction has become a major market for commodification and so activities that once occurred in the home, done by either the housewife or servant, now take place by profit-making firms. An increased range of services now exists as paid services, often removed from the home but still performed by women, often of a lower economic class and in the US, different race – from food preparation and serving (restaurants and fast-food), caring for

<sup>19</sup> Phyllis Palmer, *Domesticity and Dirt: Housewives and Domestic Servants in the United States, 1920–1945* (Philadelphia, 1989).

<sup>20</sup> Evelyn Nakano Glenn, "Racial Ethnic Women's Labor: The Intersection of Race, Gender, and Class Oppression", *Review of Radical Political Economy*, 17 (3), pp. 119–137; Jones, *The Dispossessed*; Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars* (New York, 1985); Margaret Hagood, *Mothers of the South: Portraiture of the White Tenant Farm Woman* (Chapel Hill, 1939).

<sup>21</sup> Elizabeth Clark-Lewis, " 'This Work Had an End': African American Domestic Workers in Washington, D.C., 1910–1940", in Carol Groneman and Mary Beth Norton (eds), " *To Toil the Livelong Day*": *America's Women at Work, 1780–1980* (Ithaca and London, 1987); David Katzman, *Seven Days a Week: Women and Domestic Service in Industrializing America* (New York, 1981).

differently abled and elderly in nursing homes, and for children in child care centers, providing emotional support in counseling offices, recreation centers and health clubs. The racial division of labor among women generates a pattern in which white women have jobs which require contact with the public or are of a managerial nature while women of color stay in the backroom, doing dirty work. The state has taken over some of women's reproductive tasks, once performed in the home: child protection, for example. Yet there is a counter movement in times of economic crisis, like the present, to push some of these services back into the home, as unpaid labor for women. The deinstitutionalization movement in long-term chronic health care is a prime example, the same movement that has led to homelessness among the mentally challenged.<sup>22</sup>

Some of these paid services remain in the home, like family day care. Sociologist Margaret Nelson has explored the contradictions that emerge from the conflict between market exchange, which certainly occurs in hired day care, and the non-market relationship that is being sold: "Family daycare providers", she notes, "are physically located in the domestic domain where caregiving follows the norm of reciprocity." Intimacy gained from caretaking of the child contradicts the market relation with the parent, usually the mother, since women are the seekers and often the purchasers of child care even among dual earner couples. But while domestic servants lose power because they work in someone else's home (though they struggle for control over their work process), day care providers work in their own homes and can set the rules. But they are vulnerable workers: parents can remove the child or report them to the licensing authorities, they are tied down to their job and to the notion that they are "natural" care givers, so not skilled.<sup>23</sup>

Given the difficulty of working-class women's lives – numerous pregnancies, childbirth, child minding, and heavy household labor – industrial homework, and now clerical home labor, appeared as the best of a set of bad options, allowing women to fulfill both reproductive and productive goals. Waged labor at home shared the invisibility of housework. Homework – the taking into the dwelling place of the family items such as garments to sew or cigars to roll or envelopes to type or coils to wind – belonged to a larger gendered structuring of employment. Not only were occupations defined as either male or female, so were the processes and places of labor. Employers structured work to take advan-

<sup>22</sup> Nakano Glenn, "From Servitude to Service Work"; Emily Abel, "Adult Daughters and Care for the Elderly", *Feminist Studies*, 12 (Fall 1986), pp. 479–497; Debbie Ward, "The Kin Care Trap: The Unpaid Labor of Long-Term Care", *Socialist Review*, 93 (1993), pp. 83–105.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret K. Nelson, "Negotiating Care: Relationships Between Family Daycare Providers and Mothers", *Feminist Studies*, 15 (Spring 1989), pp. 7–33.

tage of sexual divisions and gender ideology. They drew upon women's position as mothers to shift the burdens of production on to the worker whose payment by the piece encouraged sweating. Employers increased profits by saving on overheads and gaining flexibility through having fewer full-time workers. Without other opportunities to fulfill all their duties, mothers turned to homework. Whereas homework could appear to them as an economic strategy, even a preferred one, it became a social problem in the minds of reformers and an economic threat to trade unionists (who feared undercutting of wages).<sup>24</sup>

Because homework brings waged labor into the home, it explodes the separateness of those two realms. It also suggests how the divisions between labor policy and family policy impeded the effort either to end homework or improve the lives of homeworkers, mostly mothers of small children, predominantly Italian in the early twentieth century but from many ethnic groups including native born rural Euro-Americans, Mexicans and Chicanas in Texas, and a few urban African Americans – who did homework depended on industries in a given region, on how employers structured their work more than the desires of women workers and their families. Significantly, then as now, employers justified their production decisions by referring to women's desires and family need: they contended that mothers could and would not leave their homes for paid labor. A garment manufacturer interviewed by the US Department of Labor in 1912 typified this kind of response: "The Italian men want their wives to keep on working, and at the same time cook the food and have plenty of children and care for them."<sup>25</sup>

But did homework allow women to meet the needs of their families? Although most homeworkers perceived of their labor as flexible – compared to the factory bell it was – they could not truly control when they would labor. The work was irregular, given to meet the employer's needs, not the rhythms of family life. As such, they resembled other wage-earning mothers whose working day stretched out between paid labor and family labor. But the homeworker experienced all her work in the same space. Children meant interrupted labor; waged labor in the home meant neglected family labor. For example, a Mexican woman in the early 1930s, who went to her mother-in-law's house to sew on a machine, reported that she "works very brokenly when babies are awake" and "complained she had no *leisure* for house work". As a Rhode Island lacemaker explained, "Women who tell they can pull many bands a day don't tell truth. Those who pull many must let their

<sup>24</sup> What follows comes from Eileen Boris, *Home to Work: Motherhood and the Politics of Industrial Homework in the United States* (New York, 1994).

<sup>25</sup> For example, see "Men's Ready-Made Clothing", *Report on Condition of Women and Child Wage Earners in the United States* (Washington, 1911), pp. 302–306.

hwk [housework] go." With housework her first priority, she began "to pull after dinner – frequently works until late at night".<sup>26</sup>

Reformers responded to the presence of homework by trying to prohibit it or impose regulations that would be so burdensome that employers would stop sending work into homes. They did not develop child and dependent care services so homeworkers could take other employment. Rather they tried to provide other sources of income while keeping the mother home: higher wages for male household heads, minimum wages for women who could leave the home for wage earning, mothers' pensions for the worthy widowed. Policies for the home and workplace in this case interconnected – to free the home from the invasion of the factory, but to maintain the separation between home and work.

Early twentieth-century labor legislation – women's labor laws such as minimum wages, maximum hours, restrictions on night work, as well as occupational health and safety laws, workmen's compensation, child labor limits – rarely included manufacturing in the home. This lack of coverage encouraged employers to send work home, extending the workday despite laws on hours. Since homework was piecework, employers could maneuver around wage laws. And because homework was in the home, who would monitor other working conditions? Who would notice if a sick child used garment pieces to lay her head on or if chemicals were mixed in a pot next to the soup? It was easy to hide the child worker by the time an inspector reached the front door. What justified such action? Homes were private spaces, not liable to public or state intrusion. If the experience of homework merged mothering and wage earning, both employer decisions and state policy reinforced the opposition of mother and worker, reminding of the inadequacy of choice models for worker behavior. Women turned to homework in a context in which employers and the law significantly determined their options. The state's major contribution to the increase of homework came ironically from the very labor laws passed to protect women and children which defined women as mothers rather than workers and failed to cover men.

In the early twentieth century, privacy arguments, as well as right to contract based on the 14th amendment, restricted labor legislation and also inhibited intervention in the family. Reformers argued otherwise. In 1909 the National Child Labor Committee claimed: "The state is bound by the law of self-preservation to deny a father or mother the privilege of exacting from his own child what would be regarded as

<sup>26</sup> Survey material relating to Mary Loretta Sullivan and Bertha Blair, "Women in Texas Industries: Hours, Wages, Working Conditions, and Home Work", *Bulletin of the U.S. Women's Bureau*, no. 126 (Washington, 1936), n. 36; survey material relating to Harriet A. Byrne and Bertha Blair, "Industrial Home Work in Rhode Island, With Special Reference to the Lace Industry", *ibid.*, no. 131 (Washington, 1935), n. 5–1–17, both in National Archives, Record Group 86.

cruel or injurious if exacted from another's child. If the parent, either through poverty, vice or ignorance is unable to provide the care and protection needed, then the state is bound to enter and become the parent of that child." Florence Kelley of the National Consumers' League, the tireless opponent of sweatshops and defender of working-class women, recognized the difficulty of such intervention: "parental exploitation of young children within the home did not technically constitute cruelty in the judicial sense." The separation of private from public, home from work, protected "the selfishness of parents and employers". Here we witness how the ideological separation of home from work obscured their actual intersection.<sup>27</sup>

The research of historians of housework, motherwork, domestic service, and industrial homework reveals that the home was a workplace, not the private sphere of ideology. Rather than apart from the world (at least for the women within), it was very much part of the world. Women's position as mothers and association with the home encouraged a segmented labor market and justified lower wages for women workers, both of which were central to capitalist industrialization in the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries. Analysis of homework in particular reminds us that labor standards also depend on factors usually thought of as belonging to family policy: the availability of child care, the extent of charity or welfare, and assumptions about home and family life.

Homework did not wither away. In the 1950s through the 1970s, when nobody much was bothering to look except for the garment unions, it festered behind the doors of new immigrant districts and along the edges of middle-class suburbs. Replacing the sweated mother of the tenements, a new icon emerged: the woman typing at home, a baby by her side. Telecommuting became the new savior: of the energy crisis, the work and home dilemma of the dual career family, of welfare dependency, even the disruptions of the 1993 Los Angeles earthquake. Gender and class divides the world of homework in the late twentieth century, offering some men and fewer women a liberating space of work, but circumscribing the employment conditions of the female majority, who find themselves turned into independent contractors as part of a larger turn to a contingent work-force, without benefit of labor standards. The freedom of the skilled computer professional, usually a man, has become conflated with the necessities that have made home-based labor attractive to female clerical workers in a society without adequate dependent care. A Massachusetts insurance claims processor, who worked on her dining room table, complained, "It didn't take long before things began to unravel: the children were at her elbow every minute demanding a tissue

<sup>27</sup> Owen R. Lovejoy, "Some Unsettled Questions About Child Labor", *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 33, supp. (March 1909), p. 58; Florence Kelley, *Some Ethical Gains Through Legislation* (New York, 1905), p. 7.

or a cookie or fighting with each other.” As the editor of the *Telecommuting Review* explained, “The great myth is that someone can sit there with a keyboard in one hand and the baby in the other.”<sup>28</sup>

The question remains, what might we expect from the current international economic crisis? Will part-time work explode, with women falling through cracks in social insurance systems that still are connected (if only in the extent of the benefit) to a citizen’s position in the wage labor market? Will women be moved into the home as unpaid workers to pick up the slack of caretaking as deinstitutionalization and defunding proceed? More likely we will see a number of trends dependent on ethnicity, class, and nation: some women will become as mobile a form of labor as men, dependent in part on other women taking up their domestic labor and motherwork for love and money while others will find themselves working beyond human endurance to meet the multiple demands of wage and unwaged labor under the reorganization of welfare states.

<sup>28</sup> Marjorie Howard, “Home Work: Escape from Office Means Stress Can Hit You Where You Live”, *Boston Herald*, 29 January 1989, A24; Alex Kotlowitz, “Working at Home While Caring for Your Child Sounds Fine – in Theory”, *Wall Street Journal*, 30 March 1987, sec. 2, p. 21.