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A portrait of Georgina Gifford, a young woman with long brown hair, wearing a dark blue denim shirt. She is standing in front of a wooden door and a staircase. Her hands are clasped in front of her.

**COMPLICATIONS OF THE  
GENDERED DIVISION OF  
LABOUR ACCORDING TO  
FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE**

## Introduction

Although women in North America have more opportunities in the present day compared to the past, they are still not fully able to take advantage of these opportunities, nor be as economically secure as men due to the on-going gendered division of labour. The gendered division of labour causes many problems in society. In this paper, I will argue along feminist lines that contemporary society is unjust due to the gendered division of labour and the issues of inequality and poverty that result from it. I will begin by providing a brief analysis of what the gendered division of labour is, and the impacts it has on women's lives, followed by dissecting the various forms of inequality it creates and the poverty that results from it.

## The Gendered Division of Labour

The gendered division of labour is comprised of both gender norms and roles. Gender, which is the social construction of what it means to be male or female, has socially prescribed attributes. Essentially, one's biological sex is translated into specific labour roles (Hartmann, 1979, p. 9). The attributes of women supposedly being caring and nurturing, and men being ambitious and intellectual, are common expectations that show how the basis of the gendered division of labour is formed. Since men are seen as ambitious and intellectual, and women as caring and nurturing, naturally jobs outside of the home are expected of men, whereas, the domestic and caregiving housework is expected of women. This historical expectation of what men and women are supposed to contribute to the household continues today. However, in present day not only are more women working outside of the home – which includes nearly 73% of Canadian women with children under the age of 16 at home in 2009 compared to only 39% in 1976 (Farrao, 2015) – but they are still expected to perform the bulk of household and caring duties as well. This is not only limiting to women, but to men as well, as these gender norms and values influence what is expected of men (i.e., working outside of the home and not staying home taking care of their children). The impact that

the gendered division of labour has on women affects their ability to balance their paid and unpaid labour. Canadian women work an average of 10.5 more hours a week inside the home than men do (Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development, 2017). All of this is caused by the norms and values perpetuated by the gendered division of labour and contemporary society's ineffectiveness in dealing with the roles prescribed to women who are in heterosexual relationships. These norms are so strong and engrained within society that it is even difficult to say that women within partnerships where both partners are choosing to subscribe to the traditional division of labour are freely choosing and consenting to this. Therefore, it is important to keep in mind how social constructions of gender can influence choices and decisions among both men and women leading to certain outcomes.

## Inequality

The most prominent inequality that results from the gendered division of labour is the amount of work women are performing compared to that of men. As mentioned above, women work an average of 4.2 hours a day of unpaid, domestic work compared to that of only 2.7 hours that men perform (Organisation for Economic and Co-operation Development, 2017). This is clearly not equal. Women are contributing more to the household in terms of domestic work and caregiving when they are also working outside of the home. This is unjust because men and women should be equal in status and social position, and to be equal in status means to be equal in contribution of household duties. Even if household and caregiving duties are not split directly in half, to have both partners contributing as much as they can will make it easier for this equality to be reached. So by having the expectation that domestic labour and caregiving is a woman's responsibility, the gendered division of labour undermines the notion of equality. Also, by women doing the majority of the unpaid labour, they then suffer the consequences of not having as much "down" time as their partner which has consequences on both their health and well-being and participation within the market.

Since women spend a lot of their time at home doing the cooking, cleaning, and raising of children, they are often left with little time to pursue other activities. Nancy Fraser refers to this lack of time as “time poverty.” Which is essentially the notion that one has an inadequate amount of time to partake in other meaningful life activities such as hobbies, sports or simply relaxation and rejuvenation from both the paid and unpaid labour one has to do (Fraser, 1997, p. 47). As of 1997, 52% of women said that they felt tired most of the time compared to the 21% men who said this (Fraser, p. 47). This finding can be attributed to the amount of work women perform, both paid and unpaid. However, it is the unequal sharing of household duties and care work that results in this finding. This clearly demonstrates how women suffer from the gendered division of labour in comparison to men. Women do not enjoy the same amount of time to pursue other activities of importance and interest as their male counterparts. This is not because they have decided to do more of the domestic work, but rather because they have been socialized to do so. The very fact that so many women feel that they must do this labour, even though their male partner is just as capable, lead to them feeling more tired than their male partners. The feeling of fatigue is a result of the prescribed household and familial duties that women feel is their responsibility. They may believe that the household and family would not operate as efficiently as it once did if they gave up this responsibility, unless the male counterpart began to share the duties leaving the woman with more time for herself.

Not only are women left with feelings of exhaustion and burnout as a result of the time poverty that the gendered-division of labour creates, but they also risk being left with little time to further their education or pursue occupational training to better their chances in the employment field when balancing both their paid and unpaid labour. As will be discussed shortly, women already face rare and challenging opportunities

for promotions due to the gendered division of labour, but they also encounter this because of the lack of time they have to invest in their potential. Because of the time constraints that women face due to working two different shifts, one paid and one unpaid, they face barriers time-wise for engaging in learning and/or training that would further develop their skill sets for the workplace as compared to men (Quinlan, 2006, p. 3). This has adverse effects on women’s career development and promotions due to lack of time they feel they can invest within their career, as can be seen by women only making up 1% of the highest earning CEOs. In addition, they will then lag behind the men who are able to dedicate more time towards their professional development. This has a profound effect on women since it is already difficult for women

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within specific job fields to be promoted due to the gendered ideas of what women are suitable for. This inequality will cause this problem to worsen, as women will then not be considered as “marketable,” especially within already male-dominated fields (Quinlan, 2006, p. 7). Additionally, without having said training, women are less likely to reap

the economic benefits that come with the training, like an increase in pay (Quinlan, 2006, p. 4).

Moreover, women are not only limited in their opportunities to receive promotions or to be hired because of lack of time to receive additional training and/or learning within their job field, but also because of the time off that they may require for caregiving duties. Since women are perceived and expected to be responsible for caregiving and the domestic labour that comes along with it, they often need to take time off from their paid work. Whether it is for maternity leave, a sick child, or an ailing parent, the socially prescribed gender roles that have historically faced woman, largely result in them being responsible for tending to these instances of need. This is not fair to women because this responsibility places an unequal amount of work upon them in comparison to their partner, but also because it means that they are taking time off

from paid labour, which can result in both a reduced chance to be promoted and a reduction in earnings in comparison to a man. Businesses tend to promote and hire the individuals who can dedicate the majority of their time to continual, uninterrupted work, as this will lead to more economic output and, thus, more profit – the ultimate goal of business (Roth, 2009, p. 26). And since women, for the most part, are generally in charge of caregiving activities, requiring time off, they are less likely to be considered ideal workers and therefore, less likely to acquire promotions or new jobs (Roth, 2009, p. 26). As a result, workplaces tend to discriminate against women for being more likely to take time off work than men leading to a major pattern of inequality. Neoliberal workplaces are not set up to be accommodating of the fact that women are not as able to be continuously engaged in their work. Such workplaces place emphasis on employees' human capital, which in this case is their ability to be continuously and fully engaged in said work as this encourages economic prosperity on the workplace's behalf. Thus, it is not inherently a woman's fault that she falls behind men at work, but rather the institutional structure that prevents women from succeeding.

Additionally, since women are not as likely to be continuously employed due to the caregiving duties that they are engaged in, they do not reap the economic benefits that come from steady full-time work. Pensions are better the longer one works, and promotions often come with pay raises. Thus, by not being able to be continuously engaged in the labour force, women lose out on the economic benefits that their male colleagues are able to enjoy, such as only earning 72 cents to that of a man's dollar (Canadian Women's Foundation, 2015, p. 1). This is not just as, once again, it is not necessarily women's intentions not to be continuously employed and thus reap the benefits of doing so. It is the social expectation that women are the caregivers and take time away from work to participate in caring work that causes it. And it is not right that women are subsequently unable to enjoy the economic benefits of doing so as men are due to this social expectation. Without workplaces accounting for the fact that the gendered division of labour is the cause of this and not allowing women to have the same economic opportunities as men, an inequality results.

## Poverty

Due to the worse opportunities for paid work that women possess as a result of the gendered division of labour, they also are more likely to face poverty. The feminization of poverty, that is, the fact that women are more likely to experience poverty than men, is, to a large degree, rooted in the gendered division of labour. Since women take more time off work due to the gendered division of labour, they are not able to earn as much as their male partners, and they do not have the chance to achieve a higher-paid work position (Gornick & Meyers, 2009, p. 9). Both of these situations can contribute to poverty. In addition, due to the unequal allotment of unpaid work between men and women, women's incomes are not close to matching their partners. There is currently no OECD country where women's incomes match that of their partners. Countries that are the closest in matching are the Nordic ones in which women contribute about 34-38% of the shared income between them and their partners (Gornick & Meyers, 2009, p. 10). This demonstrates how women tend to make significantly less money in comparison to their partner. The effect this has on women's lives is troubling as it not only causes women to rely upon men in order for their physical needs to be met, leading to the impediment on women's independence, but it also means that women are at a greater risk for poverty when leaving a partnership (Okin, 1989, p. 17). For example, between the years of 1999 to 2004, 25% of women who separated or divorced entered low-income status compared to only 10% of men (Gadalla, 2008, p. 233).

In addition, women are at a greater risk of poverty due to the types of paid labour they do. Many jobs women enter are aligned with what the gendered division of labour sets out. That means that since women are supposed to be caring and nurturing, they are socialized from a young age to aim for and fulfill jobs that by their nature offer opportunities for caring and nurturing. For example, typically female jobs such as early childhood educators and personal support workers are usually paid significantly less than jobs deemed to be masculine like construction and engineering (Weisgram, Bigler & Liben, 2010, p. 780). In 2009, 67% of women were employed within a traditionally female job (Ferrao, 2015).

And even though promoting women to enter the masculine-deemed science, technology, engineering and mathematics fields will hopefully breakdown the economic disparity that results from women not entering the higher paid, “masculine sectors,” sectors that are mainly fulfilled by women need to be paid well too. The pay for these types of jobs is often very little and needs to be increased so that those occupying these positions are able to be more financially secure. Thus, more value needs to be given to the caring and nurturing jobs.

Lastly, since the expectation that caregiving and domestic duties are placed upon women, women often need to make the choice between staying home or working outside of the home. Many women do like to work outside the home, but with the amount of labour that is expected of them inside the home, some women opt to work part-time. However, part-time work is typically not as economically sustainable as full-time work due to the lower wages associated with it within

neoliberal North America. Full-time work also tends to offer benefits such as health insurance and vacation time, benefits not offered for part-time work (Rosenfeld & Birkelund, 1995, p. 111). In addition, this effect is compounded by the expense of childcare. In North America, childcare is expensive relative to household income. In Toronto, Ontario, full-time childcare for a child between the ages of 1.5 and 3 years old costs \$1,375 a month. (Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 2016, p. 15). This is an expense that can prove to be inaccessible for some families and women which means that women may look at either working and having a significant portion of their income go to child care expenses, or engaging in unpaid work at home in order to provide childcare themselves with no expense – which often results in a perpetuation of poverty in itself. Nevertheless, women do want and often need part-time work for financial and personal satisfaction. However, part-time work, at least in the North-American context, is rarely satisfactory with the amount of money that it provides.

## Conclusion

Taking into consideration the effects that the gendered division of labour has upon women within a heterosexual relationship, the results are clearly not just. Due to the considerable amount of time women spend doing the domestic, unpaid labour and childcare in comparison to their male counterparts, inequality and the feminization of poverty results. The various dimensions of inequality this paper explores coupled with the increased likelihood women are to experience poverty, demonstrates that contemporary North American society cannot claim to be truly feminist or egalitarian. In order for a feminist society to exist, society must abolish the gendered division of labour as it controls many aspects of life as discussed. Or if the gendered division of labour is still to exist, to prevent the inequality and poverty that results from it, society should at least be understanding and accommodating of what the gendered division of labour requires of women, in order for women not to experience the negative repercussions of doing so.

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