

Introduction

The *International Labour Review* and gender equality: The importance of women's unpaid and paid work

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Abstract. *This introduction to the Centenary Issue of the International Labour Review (ILR) on women and gender equality reflects on the distinctive contributions included. It emphasizes the need to recognize the undervaluation of work that women have traditionally performed both in the home and in the labour market. It also highlights diverse efforts to remedy these intricately linked problems.*

Keywords: *gender equality, inequality, women workers, unpaid work, feminism, social policy, care, norms.*

The *International Labour Review* (ILR) has built a rich and enduring legacy of contributions to the literature seeking to understand gender inequality. This makes it a rewarding task to consider the selection of articles to be included in this Centenary Issue. Diving through this powerful, intergenerational wave of scholarship, I was reminded of old epiphanies and startled by new insights. A careful look at the history of ideas often helps push them forward. Virtually all of the articles selected here were prescient in their recognition of the importance of women's unpaid and paid work and the links between them that contributed to their devaluation. The articles are also characterized by an appreciation of institutional factors, including cultural norms and social policies, that mediate the interaction between supply and demand in the labour market.

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Since the articles in this Centenary Issue are presented chronologically, I summarize them in the same order, while also commenting on their remarkable synergies. I have indulged in a bit of biographical research with respect to some of the earlier articles as a way of placing them in a broader context. This seemed unnecessary for the later pieces, since their authors are likely well known to many readers (and their biographies remain unfinished).

The first article, written by Rajani Kanta Das, published in 1931 and entitled “Woman Labour in India: I”, is fascinating in its portrayal of the family-based organization of production. Das reports that 74 per cent of women workers were employed in agriculture, which was about the same as the percentage of people depending on agriculture for their livelihood. He points out that relatively few women were employed in “organized industries” (that is, the formal economy), largely as a result of social customs (Das 1931, 377–378). Since plantations, factories and mines were regulated by labour legislation, some data for women employed in these sites were available.

Tea, coffee and rubber plantations were a major source of family-based employment that encouraged women and children to work side by side with men. Das does not provide details on how, or to whom, family-based wages were paid, but his article makes it clear that penal servitude and indenture were also significant features of labour supply. His account devotes particular attention to the negative effects of labour legislation, which often reduced women’s employment in factories and mines (Das, 386–391).

A brief effort to learn more about Das reveals that he was probably the first Indian to obtain a doctoral degree in economics from an academic institution in the United States – the University of Wisconsin, where he was a student of the renowned institutionalist labour economist John R. Commons. He was a strong believer in efforts to equalize economic opportunities for women and men and one of relatively few Indian economists employed by the ILO at the time. Apparently, Das was known for incurring the wrath of British officials in India (Krishnamurty 2011, 57).

The author of my next selection, Antonina Vallentin, was a Polish editor and translator with wide-ranging interests who worked for the German Foreign Ministry. I was charmed by the gentle irony of her 1932 account of “The Employment of Women since the War”. She writes, “The opinion has been widely held that in modern times, and in particular during and since the war, the labour market has been invaded by women on a much larger scale than in previous generations” (Vallentin 1932, 480). She goes on to challenge this widespread opinion, poking fun at fears that women were somehow getting out of hand and, at the same time, celebrating their gradual entrance into better-paying occupations.

Fast-forward to 1965 (one may wonder why so little of note was published on this topic between the 1930s and the 1960s) and Magdalena Sokolowska’s “Some Reflections on the Different Attitudes of Men and Women towards Work”, which focuses primarily on employers’ attitudes towards women workers. This Polish author, one of the relatively few contributors to the ILR from a socialist country, emphasizes the greater representation of educated

women in professional positions in both the Soviet Union and Poland than in the United States. Sokolowska describes discriminatory behaviour at a point in time when the words “discrimination” and “discriminatory” were rarely used, and they are also absent from her article. At the same time, she emphasizes the supply-side constraints imposed by women's responsibilities for family care, foreshadowing concerns more explicitly addressed in future ILR articles.

The next article explores responsibilities for family care from a public policy perspective. In “Women's Rights and Widows' Pensions”, published in 1972, Pierre Laroque begins with a bow to the conventional wisdom that widows require public pensions because of their dependence on their husbands' earnings. He quickly segues to an insistence on recognizing “the bringing up of children and the running of a home” as “essential tasks which, if not directly recompensed in money, contribute no less substantially to the economic development and the welfare of the community in general” (Laroque, 9). His insistence on the productive contributions of unpaid work anticipates many of the later articles included here.

Laroque has an interesting biography. Although many contributors to the ILR have been deeply embedded in public policy as well as research, his record stands out. He was dismissed from the French civil service in 1940 on account of his Jewish heritage, joined the Resistance and, at the end of the Second World War, joined the French Government under President Charles de Gaulle, in which he was tasked with helping to design new social programmes. He is widely considered one of the architects of the French welfare state.

Another eminent contributor, Mercedes B. Concepción, is a Filipina scholar widely respected for her impact on population research. In 2005, she won the United Nations Population Award for her outstanding work. In “Female Labour Force Participation and Fertility” (Concepción 1974), she explores the relationship between women's economic activities and the decisions made about family size, noting significant differences between developed and developing countries because of the greater informality of employment in the latter.

Concepción does not seem to have recognized the relatively rapid fertility decline that was gaining speed in many countries in the early 1970s, when she wrote this article. Still, her exploration of the many different factors that influence the relative cost of raising children in urban and rural environments remains relevant today. Also notable is her critique of the conventional definitions of “labour force”, which have excluded women's unpaid activities and underestimated their participation in informal market work. She explains why the resulting ambiguities taint the comparability of international measures of “female activity rates” (Concepción, 506), a theme explored in more detail in the next article.

Richard Anker's “Female Labour Force Participation in Developing Countries: A Critique of Current Definitions and Data Collection Methods”, published in 1983, systematically criticizes the common practices that statistical offices employed at the time, many of which remain problematic today. He includes specific examples of poor wording and other administrative practices that have often confused respondents to labour force surveys. He also lays out

a major conceptual inconsistency in the distinction between economic (labour force) and non-economic (non-labour-force) activities. The internationally accepted System of National Accounts (SNA) specifies as “economic goods and services” (and therefore labour force activities) those that are performed for pay or profit. However, with regard to activities performed for one’s own household consumption, the SNA includes only goods but not services – largely provided by women – as “economic” labour force activities. For instance, the labour devoted to growing vegetables qualifies as “economic” in nature, but the time preparing vegetables for consumption does not. Similarly, labour spent on building a house is considered an “economic” activity, but the time women spend on maintaining or cleaning the house is seen as “non-economic” (Anker, 712–713). Anker labels the resulting distortion of women’s labour force participation a “straightforward sex bias” (714).

Over the past 30 years, additional research on this inconsistency has gradually increased pressure for change. In 2013, the 19th International Conference of Labour Statisticians officially redefined “work” as “any activity performed by persons of any sex and age to produce goods or to provide services for use by others as well as for own use” (ILO 2013, para. 6). At the same time, however, the conference advocated a new, narrower definition of “labour force” that excludes all those who primarily produce for their own consumption, such as subsistence farmers. Some critics consider the introduction of this definition a new and unfortunate inconsistency (Folbre 2020a). Since it is not clear how many national statistical agencies have adopted either of these new guidelines, the issue of what constitutes economic and non-economic activities remains far from settled.

The paid and unpaid work of women in the rural areas of low-income developing countries is particularly susceptible to underestimation – a point highlighted by Zubeida Ahmad in her 1984 article “Rural Women and Their Work: Dependence and Alternatives for Change”. She focuses on the deterioration of living standards among the rural poor, especially among women with limited access to land, little control over the fruits of their labour and restricted mobility because of family responsibilities. Ahmad was among the first to describe the erosion of women’s traditional rights to land that resulted from European colonization and, later, from national agrarian reforms that prioritized male heads of household. Her account of these processes anticipates more detailed later research on women’s land rights in South Asia (Agarwal 1994), Latin America (Deere and León 2001) and Africa (Doss et al. 2015). Ahmad continued to explore these and related issues.

Richard Anker and Catherine Hein’s exploration of “Why Third World Urban Employers Usually Prefer Men”, published in 1985, provides a great companion piece to Sokolowska’s 1965 article discussed earlier. It stresses demand-side factors that contribute to occupational segregation and lower pay for women and notes that, on a global level, women professionals are highly concentrated in education and health occupations. It also calls attention to maternity leave regulations that create a disincentive for employers to hire women of childbearing age (Anker and Hein, 87). Such regulations are still in place in some countries, despite explicit efforts by the ILO to abolish them.

Richard Anker has made many important contributions to international research on gender inequality in employment and earnings. An article not included in this issue because of its relatively narrow focus on Nordic countries nevertheless deserves a mention. It shows that gender norms significantly influence patterns of employment even in countries with clear-cut policies designed to socialize many of the costs of raising children (Melkas and Anker 1997).

In 1987, Martha F. Loutfi published an article that weaves many of the points raised above into an explicitly feminist perspective on development priorities: “Development with Women: Action, Not Alibis”. This article stands out for its explicit reference to “patriarchal structures” – a term that has, since then, acquired more theoretical valence. Loutfi points to such structures as providing motivation for a “special effort to encourage and assist initiatives among poor women and to channel a major flow of resources to them” (Loutfi, 112). Loutfi was in the forefront of efforts challenging the assumption that household resources are always pooled and hypothesizing that women devote more of the income under their control to meeting family needs than do men. Unlike many of her contemporaries, she was willing to suggest that male workers, as well as capitalist employers, derive some benefits from patriarchal institutions that enforce unequal pay for work of equal value.

Relatively few articles in the ILR have taken a microeconomic approach using household-level data. However, in their 1992 article “Day Care in Europe and Mothers’ Forgone Earnings”, Heather Joshi and Hugh Davies build on earlier work (Joshi 1990) to simulate the opportunity cost of rearing children based on detailed analyses of women’s lifetime employment and earnings histories. Their estimates clearly reveal the impact of public policies – especially those relevant to the provision of childcare (Joshi and Davies 1992, 561). Similar methods have since been widely adopted for the analysis of “motherhood penalties” in the United States and Europe (Sigle-Rushton and Waldfogel 2007) and, more recently, in developing countries (Gautham 2021; Agüero, Marks and Raykar 2020).

So many binaries and boundaries come into play in these discussions: men versus women, paid work versus unpaid work, the economic versus the social. In her article, “Labour, Gender and the Economic/Social Divide”, published in 1998, Julie Nelson offers brilliant insights into people’s conceptual maps of the world. Her gender compass diagrams illustrate a common propensity to emphasize the positive side of masculine traits (for example, “strong” rather than “rigid”) and the negative side of feminine traits (for example, “weak” rather than “flexible”). She highlights the economic/social divide when she rhetorically asks, “Why should child care, elder care, and care of the sick be economic when provided by markets (or sometimes government), but unworthy of study by economists when done in private homes?” (Nelson, 44).

Nelson’s insights have long informed my research on the “care sector” of the economy, which challenges the assumption of separate spheres by pointing to similarities between unpaid and paid care work. My article “Assigning Care: Gender Norms and Economic Outcomes”, published in 1999 and co-authored

with M.V. Lee Badgett, argues that individual preferences cannot be taken as a given (Badgett and Folbre 1999). Most societies impose on women cultural obligations for the care of others that are economically costly even when they are emotionally rewarding.

Women who violate traditional norms of femininity tend to fare better in the labour market than those who do not, but they pay a price in the marriage and dating “market”, which also profoundly affects their living standards. The powerful influence of traditional norms, combined with the difficulty of imposing new obligations on men, puts women in a weak bargaining position that forces them to choose between providing care or allowing care needs to go unmet (Folbre 2020b). Here is our rhetorical question: “If women ‘naturally’ choose to specialize in care, why do societies develop coercive rules and practices that make it difficult for them to do otherwise?” (Badgett and Folbre 1999, 317)

The reluctance to view unpaid labour as an economic activity derives, in part, from the desire to see it as a natural impulse or a moral obligation. Lourdes Benería provides a comprehensive overview of “The Enduring Debate over Unpaid Labour” up to 1999, exploring its intellectual history in some detail and building on the articles discussed above (Benería 1999). In retrospect, it is astonishing that her crystal-clear explanation of the contradictions of national accounting conventions gained so little traction among policymakers until recently. Then again, it is encouraging to note that nationally representative time use surveys have proliferated over the past 20 years and have provided the empirical means to develop the revisions that Benería eloquently called for. So-called “satellite accounts” that estimate the monetary value of unpaid work (among other non-market activities) are now being developed by a number of different countries (UN 2019).

Both the unpaid work that women perform and the kinds of jobs they enter in paid employment help explain their vulnerability to cuts in public spending. Sidita Kushi and Ian P. McManus offer fascinating details in their 2018 article “Gendered Costs of Austerity: The Effects of Welfare Regime and Government Policies on Employment across the OECD, 2000–13”, which documents the disparate impact of the Great Recession of 2007–09 on women. Their comparative analysis shows that types of social protection matter; women fared better in some regions than others, even though explicit attention to the disparate impact of stimulus policies on women was rare.

National policies, however, may be declining in importance as corporate production assumes an increasingly multinational form. Hence the importance of the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs), which outline a governance framework for addressing human rights. Can these help advance gender equality? In “Gender and Governance of Global Value Chains: Promoting the Rights of Women Workers”, published in 2019, Stephanie Barrientos, Lara Bianchi and Cindy Berman offer a mixed reply to this question. The challenges are great, and one might argue that global value chains designed to minimize labour costs are unlikely to increase women’s empowerment.

On the other hand, consumer-driven preferences for transparency and social responsibility seem to be growing. Barrientos, Bianchi and Berman take a close look at gender policies developed by ten companies participating in the Ethical Trade Initiative, and their article is somewhat sceptical of the initiative's overall results. Nonetheless, it reports interesting and worthwhile policies developed by a company in the Kenyan tea industry on behalf of its women workers, holding out the possibility of further progress. Attention to platforms for governance of human rights in employment seems a fitting conclusion to this Centenary Issue, since it speaks directly to the larger mission of the ILO.

Although it is impossible to distil the articles included in this issue into a simple summary, together they implicitly broaden the concept of collective bargaining beyond its typically narrow application to explicit negotiations between employers and unions. They showcase the many researchers who have joined arms in an effort to nudge statistical agencies towards expanded definitions of work, including processes of care necessary to social reproduction. We see how both women and men have pushed for more definite efforts to discourage unfair forms of discrimination. Many feminists have pushed for changes in both social policy and cultural norms that could empower women, emphasizing the advantages such changes could bring to the larger process of sustainable development. Many activists have persuaded consumers to use their buying power strategically in order to reward socially responsible firms.

These efforts have gradually contributed to at least modest improvements in gender equality on a global level, including reforms of family law and increases in access to education and professional employment. Obviously, many obstacles remain, vividly exemplified in the impact of COVID-19 – increases in women's unpaid workload accompanied by widespread loss of paid employment. Yet, women will continue to mobilize efforts to reach gender equality, informed by a greater understanding of the contradictory processes of collective conflict within a global economy characterized by many intersecting and overlapping forms of collective inequality.

I close with appreciation for both the history and the future of the ILR's publications on gender inequality, and also with confidence that readers of this Centenary Issue will put its insights to good use. Much remains to be researched, and even more needs to be put into successful practice.

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