

# Is the Family the Appropriate Site for Social Reproduction in South Africa?

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The family is pivotal to the maintenance of the neo-liberal order, an order marked by an intense individualism and a privatisation of social relations. Among working-class households there is a retreat into the private sphere of the family/household which involves an atomised struggle for daily survival, rather than collective mobilisation.

The family-based household is the site of the domestic labour which is essential to the social reproduction of labour power. It involves the performance of various caring functions in society, particularly the care of the very young and the very old. Globally it is work that is mainly done in the household through the unpaid domestic labour of women. Black working-class women are performing most of the paid and unpaid domestic labour in South Africa.

In 1919 Lenin pointed out that despite 'all the laws emancipating women, she continues to be a domestic slave, because petty housework crushes, strangles, stultifies and degrades her, chains her to the kitchen and the nursery'. Hence Lenin argued strongly for the socialisation of domestic labour, to 'transform petty housekeeping into a series of large-scale socialised services: community kitchens, public dining rooms, laundries, repair shops, nurseries, kindergartens and so forth'.

In most former communist countries most of the basic conditions of social reproduction were socialised. While these are associated with failed economic systems, there are aspects that can address our crisis. It is time for progressive forces to return to these demands.

## **The globalisation of paid domestic work**

Much has changed since Lenin wrote. Domestic labour is increasingly commoditised and globalised. Women from the global South and European post-socialist countries have been recruited to service in an exploding demand for domestic labour in the United States, Canada, European Union, Hong Kong and the Middle East. Domestic workers have multiplied and the predominantly female domestic and day-care workers are increasingly plugged into patterns of global labour migration. It all involves work for low wages under poor working conditions.

## **Domestic work in South Africa**

Paid domestic work remains the single largest category of women's employment in South Africa. Approximately one out of every five employed women is a domestic worker in a very gendered and racialised occupation. The official estimate for the paid domestic work sector was 101 3000.

During apartheid several full-time live-in domestic workers in white homes described themselves as 'slaves'. Has this changed? While domestic workers have formal legal rights, national minimum wages are still much below other sectors (R1 066 per month in urban areas in 2007 and R865 in rural areas for a 45-hour week). There is also a shift from full-time live-in work to live-out and part-time work. Domestic workers remain a racialised and gendered cheap labour force. They perform the cooking, cleaning and childcare work that is essential to social reproduction. These women continue to work for long hours and low wages and are subjected to demeaning treatment.

## **The crisis of social reproduction in South Africa**

These working-class women are also responsible for the domestic labour involved in social reproduction in their own households. An analysis of their everyday lives points to a crisis in social reproduction. Tensions have accumulated to the point where people's capacity to lead fulfilling lives is threatened. The extent of the crisis is evident in rising levels of poverty and social inequality, the extent of gender-based violence, the lack of access to adequate water, the HIV/AIDS pandemic, the inadequacy of social grants, and rising food and fuel prices. African working-class women are the worst affected, being responsible for the administration of household consumption. When food prices go up or pre-paid water meters are installed, and incomes fall, in most former communist countries most of the basic conditions of social reproduction were socialised. Women have to stretch limited resources and do more unpaid work.

### **Rethinking social reproduction in the privatised sphere of the family/household**

Should social reproduction be an individual matter, located in the privatised sphere of the family-based household where it 'inevitably' falls on women? The household, 'the hidden abode of reproduction', is shrouded in secrecy, part of the private sphere and therefore not susceptible to investigation or debate. Family relations and divisions of labour are regarded as part of a 'natural' order, and therefore not open to question. The extent of violence, power and labour in the household is often unacknowledged.

For Lenin, a housewife was a domestic 'slave'. Lenin believed that women's unpaid labour within the family/household was a major obstacle to progress. Another Marxist, Alexandra Kollontai, talked about the necessity of introducing public services of every kind that would free men and women, especially women, from the petty cares of everyday life involved in social reproduction. Kollontai and Lenin were both calling for the socialisation of domestic labour.

How can the notion of socialised domestic labour address the current crisis, and mitigate the tensions and struggles black working-class women face? The reality is that, due to the migrant labour system and mass relocations, the family and the household are not the same, though they are closely linked. While South Africa is noted for its support for a diversity of family forms, specifically for polygamy and same-sex marriage, there is still a tendency to view the nuclear family form as the most effective vehicle for maintaining social stability. But there are many powerful critiques of the nuclear family as an 'anti-social unit' which monopolises the caring and sharing which should be spread more widely. For many feminists it is a small and reactionary unit which blocks the development of revolutionary solidarity, and confines women. Albert Memmi argued that the nuclear family also distorted the personalities of men. 'He will remain glued to that family which offers him warmth and tenderness but which simultaneously absorbs, clutches and emasculates him ... the family smothers him.'

It follows that there is a need to rethink the traditional sites of social reproduction. Actual social arrangements in South Africa, as in most of the world, are far from the nuclear family model of a

single male breadwinner and dependent wife and children. Most poor households rely on income and survival strategies from several members rather than a single 'breadwinner'. Most rely on support from a variety of sources, wages being only one. At the same time workingclass women perform a double load of the care work involved in both paid and unpaid domestic labour. Care work in all its aspects needs to be recognised, legitimated and valued, and the provision of care needs to be seen as a matter of public policy for developing countries.

Recent calls by South Africans that child and elder-care needs to be 'defamilialised' resonate with the manifesto of the Federation of South African Women which included the demand for socialised child care, as well as a minimum wage, subsidised food and housing.

By looking beyond the 'family' for the work of care-giving, we can create employment for more working and caring citizens, and build social solidarity. Furthermore, it would enable men and women to share equally in the work that these programmes create. Lenin criticised the general passivity and 'backwardness' of many communist men on this issue. He stressed that 'we must root out the old slave-owners' point of view, both in the Party and among the masses'. This 'rooting out' is an urgent task and should include an honest discussion of how the private sphere of the family/household relates to the spirit of revolutionary solidarity and collective struggle that we in South Africa need to revive.

Some argue for going beyond the family/household system and the social democratic welfare state for 'more collective forms of living together that broaden the group of people sharing the work of care; and ... democratic and participatory forms of organising public services that engage both care-workers and those dependent on their care in mutual governing relationships'. In our context examples of socialised domestic labour are cooperative housing arrangements, shopping schemes and bulk buying. It also includes low-cost, high-quality laundry services, childcare cooperatives, vegetables gardens, shared transport arrangements, and communal kitchens. These collective arrangements build on existing township traditions of burial societies and stokvels.

In the words of Lenin 'these community kitchens, public dining rooms, laundries and repair shops, crèches, kindergartens, children's homes and educational institutions' would relieve women from their 'old domestic slavery', enabling them 'to give their capabilities and inclinations full play'. Collective arrangements are also sites of learning and re-learning relations of sharing, support and solidarity, reviving a spirit of sharing and solidarity rather than consumerist individualism.

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\* From Amandla! website:

<http://www.amandlapublishers.co.za/special-features/sa-national-womens-day/593-is-the-family-the-appropriate-site-for-social-reproduction-in-south-africa>