

Housework and the Correction of Gender Inequity

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The Bill of Rights in the *Constitution of the Republic of South Africa* (1996) stipulates that no-one, including the state, 'may unfairly discriminate against anyone on one or more grounds, including race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religion, conscience, belief, culture, language and birth'. These words deserve the deep contemplation and vigorous argumentation that they have provoked, and they should continue to be evaluated and debated. People belonging to many of the groups and categories identified in this extract – and their advocates – have been vocal in their accusations and denunciations of discrimination; and gender has been one of the most widely contested categories.

But there is an area of gender discrimination that rarely comes up for discussion: domestic labour in the family home. Few people even regard as an inequity the fact that, in South Africa as in other parts of the world, housework remains almost entirely the responsibility of women (Greenstein 1996: 586; Lee & Waite 2005: 328; Casale & Posel 2005: 27). In the privacy of the domestic setting, people tend to consider themselves as exercising their rights freely and to see their allotment of housework and childcare either as a matter of biology or of personal choice. ('Personal choice' may of course, include affiliations to cultural traditions and religious doctrines.) Nevertheless, the imbalance of basic fairness that almost every child witnesses in the environment in which she or he first comes to consciousness is crucially material in the perpetuation of this and other injustices in his or her later life. The home is the microcosm on which the larger units of society are built. Until women and men start to share equitably in the often arduous work entailed by the maintenance of a household, there will be no gender equality in our country. As a corollary, until this basic inequity is corrected, there will also be no end to gender-based violence, which roots itself in the politics of family life.

In divorce cases around the world, judges have found that domestic labour is serious work, with significant financial value (Quah 1989: 108). Even in South Africa, where domestic workers are notoriously underpaid (Casale & Posel 2005: 25), their labour is publicly seen to have a cost and to be for some a full-time career. And yet, whether or not a household also employs a domestic worker, wives and mothers are required – by families and society, including themselves in most cases – to do the lion's share of household and child management. They are basically unpaid servants in their own homes.

This situation persists to different degrees among all race groups and ethnicities, regardless of who constitutes the breadwinner(s) in the home. Most officially employed South African women end up with two jobs, each of which could for many of them be regarded as a full-time career. Research shows how negatively this double employment impacts on women's success and promotion in, for example, academic careers, where the ability to work outside and in addition to regular office hours is favoured (Bhana & Pillay 2012: 83). Men in these fields

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mostly command far more free time in their homes; they can work while dinner is prepared for them, their children put to bed, their clothes and houses cleaned by female hands.

But housework is not just a demanding additional career. It is demeaning. Humans tend to classify work according to how much physical or mental effort is required, with the more desirable and admired jobs at the mental end of the scale. The amount of dirt and repulsiveness involved also plays a role. No matter how many modern conveniences and appliances a family may afford, these cannot make cleaning floors, toilets, soiled underwear and babies' bottoms much more appealing – or any less necessary. Though not all household chores are physically onerous or disgusting, they are, with the possible exception of cooking, widely regarded as low, somewhat degrading tasks. And because they have been almost universally performed by women, women have been almost universally tainted with their degradation.

Dorothy Dinnerstein in her extraordinary book *The Mermaid and the Minotaur*, originally published in 1976, demonstrates at length how both men and women are brought up to despise and even hate women. This occurs, she claims, because nearly all of us are raised in early childhood solely by female hands (1976: 28-34, 147). Dinnerstein pays most of her attention to childcare and the powerful emotions that it arouses in the young child, but she does mention other housework when she styles the woman of the house as typically the 'keeper of the hearth and doer of domestic tasks' (1976: 20).

Dinnerstein's solution to what she saw as a gender crisis was an equal sharing of childcare, of both men and women tending the body and developing the mind and emotions of the infant (1976: 78-81). This sharing, if it were to be comprehensive, should clearly include all the other 'domestic tasks' that she mentions so cursorily; for these tasks are regarded as menial and offer to the child further proof of women's inferiority. The sight of the mother scrubbing floors, wiping dishes, carrying groceries, changing nappies, making beds, washing, sorting, mending clothes and, more importantly, serving her man with food and drink cannot but make an impression on every child of every gender. The master-servant relationship may be partly concealed by domestic appliances and domestic employees, but the child is not fooled. Even when a man deigns to undertake some of the household chores, he is more often than not just 'helping out', not taking full responsibility (Bhana & Pillay 2012: 86; Erickson 2005: 340). In the bargaining that underlies married relationships, the woman would at some stage have to pay back his 'favour', not simply regard it as his rightful obligation.

Dinnerstein perceived household politics as the source of broader neglect and injustice. She expressed concern that women, though they probably 'invented fishing nets, basketry, weaving and pottery' (1976: 22), got scarce recognition for their ingenuity. In fact, she saw women as 'exclu[ded] from history', since they have been figured merely as 'rocking the cradle' while men were busy 'ruling the world' (1976: 28-160). Her desired reform of household gender roles was intended to redress this inequity in the world in general.

Nearly half a century since *The Mermaid and the Minotaur* appeared, women may be less excluded from elite jobs and political office, but true equality is still far away. It is no coincidence that Dinnerstein's desired reform has never been properly implemented. Research conducted in the USA shows that women's contributions to childcare and other household work in that country are everywhere greater than men's and that this is not dependent on whether women are employed, how many hours they spend working outside the family home or whether they earn more or less than their male partners (Erickson 2005: 346; Greenstein 1996: 585; Lee & Waite 2005: 328; Simister 2013: 311). In fact, studies conducted in many different countries find that men who earn less than their female partners, or are unemployed, do even less housework than men whose work status is greater than or similar to that of their female partners (Sanchez 1993: 456; Stevens et al 2001: 515-516; Poortman & van der Lippe 2009: 526). According to Daphne Stevens, Gary Kiger and Pamela J. Riley, 'It is argued that men who earn less than their partners eschew housework to protect and assert their threatened masculinity' (2001: 515).

In this concept of ‘threatened masculinity’ of course lies the rub. Traditional gender roles are deeply implicated in the allocation of housework. West and Zimmerman (1987: 144) clarify the stereotypes:

It is not simply that household labor is designated as ‘women’s work’, but that for a woman to engage in it and a man not to engage in it is to draw on and exhibit the ‘essential nature’ of each. What is produced and reproduced is not merely the activity and artifact of domestic life, but the material embodiment of wifely and husbandly roles, and derivatively, of womanly and manly conduct.... What are also frequently produced and reproduced are the dominant and subordinate statuses of the sex categories.

Traditional gender roles everywhere specify these ‘dominant and subordinate statuses’. We should not become sentimental about this kind of tradition, or try pathetically to shore up ‘threatened masculinity’ when it cries for help. All the conservative and prescriptive models of gender difference directly oppose the ideal of equity that the South African Bill of Rights, like similar rights declarations in other progressive democracies, espouses.

That South African society does not (yet) live up to the progressiveness of its Bill of Rights is displayed most glaringly in its extreme record of gender-based violence. As Carol Bower (2014: 110) puts it:

The deeply patriarchal nature of South African society is ... reflected in the social constructions of masculinity and femininity, which feed directly into high levels of gender-based violence. Femininity is still seen as inextricably linked to motherhood and dependence on a man, while masculinity is defined by sexual activity and conquest.

‘Social constructions of masculinity and femininity’ are for the young child created in the home, by the master-servant relationship played out before his or her eyes. This relationship requires radical intervention if gender equity is to be achieved in any sphere of our society—and if gender-based violence is ever to subside.

Changing our most basic archetypes of gender is of course not as easy as tying on an apron and sweeping a floor. But the process does have to start somewhere. As a public figure who set so many moral examples to our people, Archbishop Desmond Tutu always made a point of sharing domestic work. He was often to be seen performing the more menial tasks in the family kitchen, working in companionable harmony with his wife Leah Tutu. While Desmond’s behaviour should be lauded as a model for all South African men, we should not neglect Leah’s example to women. Many South African women actively exclude men from the sphere of domestic tasks because of the modicum of power and identity that these bequeath to them. The Tutus’ model of sharing should be adopted in all South African households, for it is an antidote to the gender rivalry and hostility that so easily build up in a home, as well as a visible icon of equality for imprinting on the mind of the young child.

Judith Butler’s theory of gender as ‘performative’ accommodates the idea that performing certain tasks can affirm a particular gender. However, Butler warns us that political and social ‘power’ constrains the ‘voluntarism’ of performance (1990: xxv-xxvii, 12). It is very hard for most men – and women – to behave in ways that go against the examples that they themselves have witnessed in their own families and throughout the cultural groups with which they identify. But, following the ideal of gender equity and fighting against the scourge of gender-based violence, we need to make extraordinary changes to our personal lives. In Butler’s words, we must use our own ‘agency as the potential interruption and reversal of regulatory regimes’ (1990: xxvii).

Taking action against inequity in South African homes at this time in history would not only forge a pathway for female advancement but also counteract domestic violence, the scourge that President Cyril Ramaphosa (2020) has called our ‘second pandemic’, based in masculine entitlement. This is a revolution that needs to be fought, bloodlessly, in every living space in our country.

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