

Pajić Tijana

Faculty of Philosophy

University of Novi Sad

EMOTIONAL LABOR BETWEEN SURVIVAL AND EXPLOITATION

Emotional labor as female (un)paid labor<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper was written as a part of the course *Sociology of Gender* mentored by Dr. Ana Pajvančić-Cizelj

## Introduction

The author aims to describe and analyze emotional labor as an integral part of unpaid household work in the context of the capitalist order. The paper begins by defining emotional labor as a gendered concept. As Lisa Heubner states: “we gender emotions in our society by continuing to reinforce the false idea that women are always, naturally and biologically able to feel, express, and manage our emotions better than men (Heubner in Hartley, 2017). Emotional labor may be characterized as a form of care for the Other and a form of emotion management. As for the care, which is gendered in favor of women, it is very often treated as irrational. This understanding of care as an unjustified emotional charge filled with feelings of worry and fear perfectly complies with the patriarchal stereotype of women. This stereotype accounts for the widely-accepted portrayal of women as inherently closer to nature, more emotional, weak, fragile, and highly intuitive. As such, emotional labor as care takes place in the field of unpaid housework. Emotional labor as emotion management, on the other hand, is less essentialist since it implies active engagement in controlling emotional expressions. Therefore, it most likely takes place in the public sphere – the sphere of work. Occupations, where emotional management is prevalent, are flight attendants, nurses, social workers, and waitresses. However, in both private and public places, emotional work is disproportionately more expected from women than from men, whether they are paid for it or not. Furthermore, the goal of this paper is to investigate emotional labor from two parallel perspectives. Not only can it be viewed as exploitation, but it can also be seen as a survival strategy at the same time. In that sense, one does not exclude the other. In both cases, the coercion and inevitability are apparent. The paper starts out by highlighting the unfavorable social position of women in society. Namely, the systemic subordination of women is a consequence of the continuous cultivation of patriarchal values. The author is trying to explore the female situation in a hermeneutical relationship between micro and macro levels, private and public spheres, as well as, family and society.

**Key words:** Emotional Labor, Capitalism, Patriarchy, Care, Emotion Management

## The Concept of Emotional Labor

Emotional labor may be defined as emotionally burdensome care for the Other. It was first acknowledged by feminists who were fighting for the recognition of housework as labor. However, an American sociologist Arlie Hochschild has noticed the prevalence of emotional labor in some professions such as medicine and management. Moreover, emotional labor was to be found predominantly in mostly female occupations in the service market. Her research of the emotional labor of flight attendants and its results were published in her book “The Managed Heart” (2003). The book tries to define the characteristics of emotional labor in regard to class and gender. Since it is often understood as emotional management, emotional labor consists of deep and surface acting which are problematic when seen as “forms of labor to be sold ... when private capacities for empathy and warmth are put to corporate uses” (Hochschild, 2003:89). By differentiating surface and deep acting, Hochschild approaches emotional labor dramaturgically. By differentiating surface and deep acting, Hochschild approaches emotional labor dramaturgically. Surface acting uses body language and facial expressions as its main tools (Hochschild, 2003). Deep acting, nevertheless, implies the actor’s active effort to feel emotion which is inseparable from the social context. Surface and deep acting resemble the concepts of the stage and the backstage developed by Erving Goffman. Emotional labor is highly client-centric and framed to favor positive emotions that are oriented towards clients. The contemporary world’s service sector quickly recognized the lubricative potentials of emotional labor, so it has integrated emotional labor as one of the assets of prospective employees. In her research, Hochschild was led by the assumption that there must be a dissonance between what the employee is projecting through the facial, body, and verbal expressions as opposed to what he/she truly feels. More recent research has, however, refuted her idea that surface acting was an alienating force in the lived experience of workers in the service sector. Other research suggests that a forced smile has, in fact, a positive effect on the employee because it triggers reciprocation of a smile on the client’s face in return. Therefore, this interaction facilitates a positive and pleasant workplace atmosphere. Alan Bryman continued examining emotions in the workplace and he has incorporated emotional labor as a constitutional part of performative labor. For Bryman, performative labor is “the rendering of work by managements and employees alike as akin to a theatrical performance in which the workplace is construed as similar to a stage” (Bryman, 2004:103). Emotional labor is also an integral part of the economy of care which is defined as “a part of human activity, material and social, that is focused on providing care to current and future workforce and human population in total” (Alexander, P. & Baden, S. in UN Women, 2020:9). In the care economy, the formal and informal spheres of paid and unpaid, productive and reproductive labor are mutually intertwined.

## Neoliberal capitalism and unpaid labor

Neoliberal capitalism is an economic and ideological system. As an economic system, it stands for market deregulation, privatization, tax leverage, and reduction of state interventionism. As an ideology, neoliberal capitalism is an attempt of keeping the status quo of current unequal power relations both social and political ones. In addition, it is inclined to maintain the rule of global economic and political elites. Moreover, neoliberal capitalism has had a significant impact on the culture and the contemporary value system. It promotes individualism in which every individual is solely responsible for his/her success or failure while the role of social inequalities is being ignored. According to Gregor and Grzebalska, “Claiming that gender difference is more important than any other structural hierarchy, and patriarchy is almost exclusively responsible for the disadvantageous situation of women, this framework ... made feminists ... blind to neoliberalism’s role in creating class inequalities among women (and men)” (Gregor & Grzebalska, 2016:13). In this sense, categories “paid” and “unpaid” labor serves the ideology whose goal is the exploitation of unpaid work and keeping women in a disadvantaged position that exposed them to exploitation in the first place. This is the main reason why monetization of nonmarket female labor is a question of the economic status of women in society. If it were to be adequately appreciated, women would be in a situation where they would be the breadwinner in the family since they would work more hours in total than men. (HDR, 1995). Neoliberal culture has a particularly monetary character which is reflected in its tendency to ascribe worth (read: price) to everything. Therefore, for a human action to be valued, it has to have a market value (HDR, 1995). This raises the question of how is it even possible for unpaid labor to exist in such cultural ethos?

Unpaid labor is often understood as a congregation of “all productive activities outside the official labour market done by individuals for their own households or for others. These activities are productive in the sense that they use scarce resources to satisfy human wants” (Swiebel, 1991:1). From a Marxist point of view, we can differentiate between productive and reproductive labor. Reproductive labor is unpaid work that comprises of “reproduction of the labour-force, both on a daily basis and between generations” (Swiebel, 1999:3). Generational reproduction is a biological one, where humankind is being increased. On a daily basis, it includes regeneration of the labor potential and human energy by providing meals, clothing, good hygiene, and health. In contrast, productive labor creates market value and surplus for the capitalist. In Marxist literature, productive and reproductive labor are strongly connected and interdependent. In essence, “the reality that men's paid work in the marketplace is often the result of "joint production", much of which might not be possible if women did not stay at home looking after the children and the household” (HDR, 1995:97). The worker in capitalism is portrayed as a grown man who is the family breadwinner ... Everything that is being invested in his total reproduction as a human being comes from the work of his family - from the woman’s unpaid housework” (Milić, 2011). Because the capitalist is actually gaining profit from the unpaid female housework, his interest is for it to stay unpaid and undervalued. Unpaid housework is indeed the source of the capitalist’s surplus. Her labor supports the system that

oppresses her, while “female oppression is central to the whole social reproduction” (Vogel, 2015).

### **Emotional work and housework as exploitation**

Despite being very similar, emotional labor and housework are not the same concepts. Emotional labor can be a part of housework, while it is often a fundamental part of some occupations as well. Due to its nature, housework is always associated with the location it takes place in, and that is the private sphere, according to the ILO convention 189. While emotional labor requires emotional efforts, housework requires physical activities. Both housework and emotional labor constitute the economy of care which is present in both private and public spheres. Taking care of the well-being of family members is an essential part of the housework. Therefore, the face of the housework is purely material while its flipside is social. Caring for others includes a wide range of activities such as cooking, doing laundry, feeding and educating the children, taking care of the old and ill family members, even taking care of the pets. From the materialistic aspect, housework is indeed manifested in the activities of cleaning and tidying. “The nature of work, especially household work, is very different in developing countries and industrial countries. Women in industrial countries have appliances to ease heavy work. And they can buy consumer goods and services that already incorporate many of the earlier stages of preparation that women in developing countries must perform themselves. Women in developing countries must carry water from a distance, collect firewood, and clean and grind food grains. So, it is not only the quantity of time but the intensity of effort (and its drudgery) that are also important” (HDR, 1995:90). It is crucial to acquire a global perspective of inequalities along with class dimension by ranging the countries into 3 categories: center, semi-periphery, and periphery, as proposed by Immanuel Wallerstein. Emotional labor and housework “could, at least in theory, be replaced by market goods and paid services” (Swiebel, 1999:1). This phenomenon is known as the “third-person criterion” which means employing and paying a third person to do activities in the household instead of the woman. In some of the more developed countries of the world’s center, some of the housework and emotional labor did become legitimate jobs. It ranges from cleaning homes to providing a sleeping buddy for lonely men. This third person criterion, however, is somewhat problematic since “there is no adequate reward or recognition for the burden of work that women carry” (HDR, 1995:97) mostly because unpaid labor makes “unpaid work an essential element in the social fabric and an important factor for the quality of life” (Swiebel, 1999:1). Binary oppositions like male/female, public/private, culture/nature, spirit/body, active/passive, are deeply rooted in stereotypes produced by a patriarchal culture that has been nurtured throughout the history of mankind. This culture of the man’s world proposes Spasić, has caught women in a household trap (Spasić, 2003).

According to Silvia Federici, in the process of naturalizing and engendering housework women have been manipulated by capitalism; this manipulation can by no means be compared to the experiences of the working class. Instead, Federici suggests that women are in a considerably different position than that of the workers because women are not a social class in a Marxist

sense. She, nevertheless, recognizes the exploitation and manipulation of workers. Federici highlights that “the wage at least recognizes that you are a worker, and you can bargain and struggle around and against the terms and the quantity of that wage, the terms and the quantity of that work. To have a wage means to be part of a social contract” (Federici, 2012:16). Despite being manipulated, the worker is not chained to one work role in his everyday life. The work role does not define a working man. His name and surname do. He may be a postman today and a taxi driver tomorrow. Housework, on the contrary, is synonymous with a woman. It “has been transformed into a natural attribute of our female physique and personality, an internal need, an aspiration, supposedly coming from the depth of our female character” (Federici, 2012:16). The reason why housework is perceived as natural and inherently feminine and not as labor is that it justifies its unpaid character. With regards to housework, emotional labor too is “underappreciated, invisible and unrecognized as a contributor to the economy” (Cowan, 2019). In a Marxist manner, Federici connects the capitalist accumulation with women’s exploitation at home. “By denying housework a wage and transforming it into an act of love, capital ... has gotten a hell of a lot of work almost for free, and it has made sure that women, far from struggling against it, would seek that work as the best thing in life” (Federici, 2012:17). Moreover, she states that the majority of jobs where women work are extensions of “the housewife’s case” (Federici, 2012). Women are usually employed as nurses, maids, teachers, or secretaries. The skills required for these job positions are the ones women have been taught at home since they were girls. One may conclude that women have been groomed to become servants from their mothers and grandmothers. Service jobs in which women make up the majority of the workforce have something in common with the housewife’s duties: other peoples’ lives depend on their labor. At the same time, it is extremely difficult to see where the work starts and where it ends. In other words, “all around the world, women are, in the process of socialization, directed toward certain jobs that require care and attention” (Stanković and Markov, 2011:324). What is more, the naturalization of emotional labor is systemic in character since “women who want to put their own feelings less at the service of others must still confront the idea that if they do so, they will be considered less feminine” (Hochschild, 2003:166). Quite contrary to Federici, Lisa Vogel thinks that unpaid housework must be analyzed with a regard to class dimension. The position of the housewife is analog to the position of a worker whose extra labor value goes right to the capitalist. However, one major difference that differentiates her work from the worker’s is that in her case - the work is not recognized as such. Therefore, the housewife’s labor has no value in economic terms. The devaluation of female labor in the capitalist system is a result of rather narrow definitions of economic activity and value (HDR, 1995).

## Emotional labor as a survival strategy

“Women, in general, have far less independent access to money, power, authority, or status in society. They are a subordinate social stratum” (Hochschild, 2003:163). This powerlessness is manifested in the “inability to participate in or influence decisions that profoundly affect one’s own life, while more powerful actors make decisions despite neither understanding the situation of the vulnerable nor having their interests at heart” (HDR, 2019:158). Since they have fewer resources women use emotions and attention as a currency in social interactions with more affluent social groups. They are offered mostly (but not exclusively) to men in return for material resources which are usually hard to come by. The roots of this social transaction are, by Hochschild, different socialization patterns of male and female children. Gender decides which skills a child shall develop and not his/her potentials. Girls are more often taught how to suppress aggression and anger. They are trained to act politely in every social setting. Boys, on the other hand, are taught to be aggressive towards the “bad guys” or those who break the social rules while being punished for expressing their emotions, fears, or vulnerabilities. Hochschild reckons that the unequal social position of women enables them to adopt emotional labor as a unique survival strategy in the contemporary world. Since, “women tend to manage feeling more because in general, they depend on men for money, and one of the various ways of repaying their debt is to do extra emotion work - especially emotion that affirms, enhances, and celebrates the well-being and status of others” (Hochschild, 2003:165).

Serbian sociologist, Marina Blagojević, perceives the *female worry* as a social construct that ties women to the private sphere, and, in return, contributes to the reproduction of a system that is dependent on female emotional and unpaid housework. Considering the fact that care, especially for the young, presents a mechanism that keeps women in the reproductive function (Blagojević, 2002). Women give birth to, feed, nurture, teach, and raise children. By narrowing this reproductive function to a mere biological category the social dimension of reproduction is being left in the shadow. The concept of *female worry* is part of a wider conception of a *sacrificed micro matriarchy*. Both were developed by Blagojević to explain the status of women from the Balkan’s post-conflict societies. She defines the *female worry* as a taught behavior, as a process, and a relationship. *Female worry* is learned in the processes of socialization and internalization in childhood. The very first object of a mother’s worry is the child; female children learn to objectify themselves in this parent-child relationship. Once they grow up, they utilize this mechanism in relation to their husbands or/and children. While it may seem like a source of women’s power and control, the *female worry* is undoubtedly a reflection of broader powerlessness and “a type of negation of power that rests on authority” (Blagojević, 2002:597). With emotional manipulation (conscious or unconscious) a woman acquires power and authority in the private sphere of her little world. According to Blagojević, there are two criteria by which is possible to measure worry: pain and work. This is because worry is energy-consuming and as such an active process where time, emotional and physical resources, as well as the health of the worried are at stake. “Worry entails consuming one’s own resources for the sake of the well-being of the Other” (Blagojević, 2002:600).

French philosopher, Simone De Beauvoir, likewise, understands the female subordination as a historical continuity that is generated inside the family; it starts in childhood and affirms itself in adulthood in the public sphere. De Beauvoir takes on a psychoanalytical approach which was developed by Carl Jung and Sigmund Freud. The differences in the socialization patterns of girls and boys stem from divergent social evaluations of childrens' sexual organs in their early childhood. As an example, she provides us with inconsistent standards for urination of girls and boys. The boy is to urinate while standing; the girl needs to hide and squat. Due to her physiognomy, the girl has nothing to handle or control. Her vagina is represented as an internal matter - as nonexistent. "The little boy defiantly compares his penis with his friends; his first erection fills him with pride and frightens him at the same time. The adult man looks upon his sex organ as a symbol of transcendence and power" (De Beauvoir, 2011:215). Furthermore, the girl is given a doll that should be a role model for her if she wants to become at least close to the ideal woman one day. The young girl is encouraged to objectify herself; "to transform herself into an object" (De Beauvoir, 2011). After idolizing her mother, "games, school, and reading lead her to realize that men, not women, are the rules of the world. This realization ... undoubtedly modifies the self-consciousness" (De Beauvoir, 2011).

## **Conclusion**

Unpaid emotional labor either in the public or in the private sphere represents the engine of the neoliberal capitalist system. Even though it is more frequently imposed on women, it does depend heavily on a person's racial or class background. Therefore, in addition to gender, someone's race, ethnicity, or religion can put a person in a double deprivileged position. Moreover, a woman's migrant status may burden her even more on the labor market. This is the case because her status is discrediting. Emotional labor and its intensity vary historically and culturally and cannot be examined without previous contextual inquiry. "Emotional labor is not a matter of personal conflict but a matter of structural inequalities" (Cowan, 2019). Emotional labor and housework are products of the patriarchal value system and together they support the neoliberal capitalist system which handicaps women and keeps them subordinated. The neoliberal capitalist system feeds on womens' physical, emotional, and sexual efforts. Finally, feminist theory cannot ignore the private sphere since it is the source of gender inequality reproduction. Someone has to remember family and friends' birthdays, organize and schedule daily activities, and note the missing food in the fridge. Romantic and marital relationships are especially significant for deeper feminist inquiries. We are unconsciously tying our hands and complying with the status quo by regarding these as "intimate" and "private" matters. Asymmetric vulnerability of women in marriage helps (re)shape the labor market that in return handicaps women who are trapped in their traditional mother roles. Economic inequality strengthens the unjust power balance in the home - especially in a heterosexual marriage. "A capitalist system which, while promising liberation, actually replaces one mode of domination by other" (Fraser, 2009:115).



## References

Blagojević, Marina. „Brinem, dakle postojim: dekonstrukcija ženske brige“, u Blagojević, M., *Mapiranje mizoginije u Srbiji: diskursi i prakse*, Kvinna Till Kvinna, Beograd, 2002, 591-603.

Bryman, Alan (2004). *The Disneyization of Society*. SAGE Publishers.

Cowan, Leah (2019). “Emotional labour is heavier burdern for some of us”. *TEDXRoyalCentralSchool*. < <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Db074Wfmzqs&t=699s> > . Accessed on 9.21.2020.

De Beauvoir, Simone (2011). *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books. New York.

Federici, Silvia. (2012). *Revolution at Point Zero: Housework, Reproduction and Feminist Struggle*. PM Press.

Fraser, Nancy (2009). “Feminism, Capitalism and the Cunning of History”. *The Left Review*, n.56.

Gregor, A. and Grzebalska, W. (2016). “Thoughts on the contested relationship between neoliberalism and feminism” in *Solidarity in struggle: Feminist Perspectives on Neoliberalism in East-Central Europe*. Budapest: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

Hartley, Gemma. (Sept. 27.2017). “Women Aren’t Nags – We’re Just Fed Up”. *Harper’s Bazaar*. Accessed on 9.21.2020.

Hochschild, Arlie R. (2003). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press.

International Labour Organization. Domestic Workers. < <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/care-economy/domestic-workers/lang--en/index.htm> > .Accessed on 10.13.2020.

Milić, Anđelka. (2011). “Marksistički i socijalistički feminizam” in: *Uvod u rodne teorije*. Novi Sad: Mediterran Publishing.

Spasić, Ivana. (2003).” Feminizam i sociologija svakodnevnog života”. *Filozofija i društvo*. XXII-XXIII.

Stanković, F., Markov, S. (2011). “Rod i ekonomija” in: *Uvod u rodne teorije*. Novi Sad: Mediterran Publishing.

Swiebel, Joke (1999). *Unpaid Work and Policy-Making: Towards a Broader Perspective of Work and Employment*. United Nations: Department of Economic and Social Affairs.

United Nations Development Programme. (1995). *Human Development Report*.

United Nations Development Programme. (2019). *Human Development Report*.

UN Women. (2020). "Ekonomija brige u vreme pandemije COVID-19 i mera za njeno sprečavanje u Srbiji".

Vogel, Lise. (12.5.2015). *Još jednom o kućanskom radu*. Slobodni filozofski.