Women’s Work and Capitalism:  
*Housewifization* and Home-based Labor in  
Indonesian Context

Fathimah Fildzhah Izzati

**ABSTRACT**

Women have been constructed in a patriarchal way as housewives whose life nature is designed around reproductive work such as household chores and childbearing. This strategy is used by capitalism as a chance to increase capital accumulation strategy by using “home” as a space to perpetuate the gender division of labor and making woman’s work invisible work. The discourse of “work and family balance” hence emerged as a pretext for such an accumulation and its existence therefore puts women in a difficult position. Furthermore, capitalism also uses that discourse to exploit women in the contract and outsourcing work system in which factory jobs are done at home, a practice commonly known as home-based labor. Using this system, companies take advantage of the daily economic pressure in Indonesia on women to contribute to their household financially. As a result, women, especially housewives, are willing to work under contract in an outsourcing working system from the factories with unlimited working hours, very low wages, and lack of job security.

**Key word:** Women, *housewifization*, work and family balance, home-based labor, capitalism

“...women’s work and women’s labor are buried deep in the heart of the capitalist social and economic structure...”

*David E Staples, No Place Like Home, page 4.*

**Introduction**

As an inherent problem in women’s daily lives, work is often overlooked and even considered as a separate issue from the women’s lives. The issue of women and work, especially in Indonesian context, is still a huge polemic. This is because the locus of women’s work itself ultimately makes the definition of “work” rather obscured. The hegemonic arrangement of women’s work at home and in the domestic sphere (household work, child bearing, and so on) makes women’s work not regarded as a meaningful work but, instead, as a part of their embedded “nature.” This neglects the labour power of women, which is often and ignored in capitalism.

In fact, the work done by women at home and in the domestic sphere is work that produces value, just like employment in the public space. This denial of women’s work in the domestic sphere as a form of employment has been widely criticized by many feminists such as Maria Mies, Silvia Federici, Leopoldina

---

2 Currently working as researcher at Indonesian Institute of Sciences/LIPI, Jakarta-Indonesia.
3 In fact, according to BPS data, women contribution in labour market 2015 is up to 37,16%. See BPS Catalogue: 2303004,Publication Number : 04120.1505. Manuscript : Sub Directorate of Manpower Statistics. Published by: BPS – Statistics Indonesia.
4 For instance, fundamentalist religious preachers in Indonesia, such as Felix Siauw, always argues that women’s “natural work” as domestic work (e.g. household work and child bearing) and tends to discourage women from another activity outside “their nature.”
Fortunati, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Lise Vogel, etc. Mies says that women’s work is often seen as a “shadow work”\(^7\), while Federici argues that the issue of unwaged women in doing household work/housework as one of the causes why housework is not considered as a “real” work.\(^8\) This has led many women to believe that their work is not a real work and hence they are different from men (who do work in public spaces). The implication, as stated by Dalla Costa and James, is that it may even affect the public perception of the leadership capacity of women compared to men.\(^9\) Moreover, the position of women who works in the production branches of capitalism, such as in factory settings, is still considered to be different from the position of men in the same working relationship. Furthermore, the invisible working life of women (included in the relations of production outside home) often becomes the initial starting point of another form of oppression in capitalism—this time in a specific spatial setting. In this case, capitalism promotes its social construction of women, home, and domestic sphere as a strategy for another form of capital accumulation.

This paper discusses two issues, first, how capitalism exploits women using the discourses of housewifization, such as the discourse of “work and family balance”, in their capital accumulation strategy and second, how such discourses influence the construction of women’s work.

“Work and Family Balance” and Women’s Work in Indonesia’s Context

The use of patriarchal constructions of women, home, and domestic sphere as a strategy of capital accumulation has been increasingly used nowadays especially in the context of global flexible labour market regime, including in Indonesia. By establishing the domestic sphere or “home” as the main locus of work, the discourse of “work-family balance” emerges to reinforce the “obligation” of women to preserve the integrity of their household. In Indonesia, this can be seen particularly through the rise of discourses and debates among middle class women in Indonesia on the dilemma between working outside or staying at home doing housework.\(^10\)

Meanwhile, the strengthening of the “work and family balance” discourse with bias against women certainly does not emerge out of historical vacuum. In the Indonesian context, the discourse of “work and family balance” is in line with the politics of housewifization that has a long pedigree in Indonesian history. Historically, the politics of housewifization was promoted under the New Order regime which kept women in the domestic sphere as a supporter of national development. Their major role was to keep the family intact through PKK institution.\(^11\) The project was part of the New Order’s ideology of patriarchy known as “State Ibu-ism”, which emerged after progressive women’s movement, such as Gerwani\(^12\) was massively destroyed by the regime in 1965-1966.\(^13\) After the destruction of the women’s movement, politics of housewifization was then launched. It continued to be practiced until now though it is not longer under the state control formally. For instance, the PKK after the New Order sometimes has a relationship that is

---


\(^10\)We can see the debate especially during 2014-2015 in social media, such as facebook and twitter.

\(^11\)PKK is an abbreviation of *Pemberdayaan dan Kesejahteraan Keluarga* (Empowerment and Family Welfare). PKK is a movement with 10 (ten) main programs which scope of their activities reaching remote villages in Indonesia. PKK is identical with activities such as *Posyandu* and other activities related to women’s daily life. PKK is driven by *Tim Penggerak PKK* (PKK team) which is structured from village level to national level under Ministry of Internal Affairs. See Ani W. Soeljipto and Shelly Adelina. 2013. *Suara dari Desa: Menuju Revitalisasi PKK*. Tangerang Selatan: Marjin Kiri.

\(^12\)Gerwani is an abbreviation of *Gerakan Wanti Indonesia* (Indonesian Women Movement). As women organisation, Gerwani had a close relationship with PKI (Partai Komunis Indonesia/Indonesian Communist Party). See Saskia Eleonora Wieringa. *Penghancuran Gerakan Perempuan: Politik Seksual Di Indonesia Pasca Kejatuan PKI*. Published by GALANGPRESS (Ikapi member).

autonomous from the state. In the Indonesian context, the discourse about the “work and family balance” overtime finds more justification in religious rhetoric. In my research, I also found that many Islamic leaders and public figure express their patriarchal interpretations including the major role of women in the household. Essentially, they are misogynists who promote conflict among women despite the common experience of patriarchal expression that they endure.

In this light, I identify that there are at least three major problems in the discourse of “work and family balance” under capitalism. First, the discourse of “work and family balance” perpetuates the construction that women should be able to keep doing housework such as washing, cooking, raising children and husband while they are working outside home (in the capitalist relations of production). Meanwhile, this requirement does not apply to men. Men do not need to wash, cook, and take care of children while working outside their home. Second, the domestic work is neither considered nor defined as a professional job (work), a conception which reinforces the construction of domestic work as something “natural” and therefore ought to be performed by women. If women do not do the housework properly, they are considered as failures – in this case as good wives. Third, the exclusion of women’s domestic work has another implication on the value of income earned by women. In this case, because the “main task” of women is taking care of the household, various work outside the home then is considered merely as an “extra” rather than “proper” work – it is just an “additional” income. Although in reality women often serve as the breadwinner, the discourse of “work and family balance” attached to women makes them considered merely as additional earners. All in all, this has hindered a more active participation of women in the public life. This also perpetuates the patriarchal construction regarding women’s lack of leadership capacity compared to men. In other words, women’s primary task is to do household work and instead of leading or managing the household.

In this regard, the new strategy of capital accumulation using the pretext of “work and family balance” and housewifization discourses can be found in two major forms, first, online business and secondly, home-based labor. In this paper, I will focus more on the second form.

Nowadays, online business today can be found easily at the advertorial pages in cyberspace. Some of these businesses can be done from home and catered to women’s domestic obligations, whether they are working-class or middle-class women. Typically, by using the internet housewives became sellers of various consumer goods for female customers such as make-up products, clothing, home equipments, and the like. They are working from their homes with the hope that they can earn some income and at the same time perform their duties as good wives and mothers. There are at least two reasons behind the decision of these women to take up these jobs: first, the increasing needs and vulnerabilities that they faced in life and second, the urge to actualize themselves in the public sphere, which cannot be accommodated in the domestic sphere. This strategy is getting more popular among housewives in Indonesia, given the increasing influence of the “work and family balance” discourse.

The capitalists also see this as an opportunity to utilize the tagline and jargon about “work and family balance” in order to attract women into this home-based online business. Additionally, this new strategy of capital also relies on home-based labour, a system in which women become workers without any guarantee and protection in terms of their employment. There are two forms of home-based work: first, women factory workers who do extra work from their workplace at home with additional working hours and second, women housewives who do factory work at home in bulk orders, commonly known as borongan workers.

---

15On the other hand, woman’s work problem always related to the problem of labour market, where woman always put in precarious condition because of many factor especially education factor.
Housewifization, “Work and Family Balance”, and Home-based Labor: A Case Study

This section describes the preliminary results of study that I have conducted since 2012 of women working in the two sectors of home-based labour. This research focuses on women factory workers in an export-oriented factory located in Bogor and women housewives who work at their houses for a wholesale apparel manufacturer in South Tangerang. This initial research was conducted using in-depth interviews and observation. Here I present a brief narrative of observation and interviews with women factory workers who do extra work from their houses.

“Home Work” from Factory

My experience of meeting with women factory workers who do extra work from the plant at their home was first obtained in 2012. At that time, I conducted a group discussion with women workers who work in a factory producing dolls with export orientation in Bogor, West Java. All of the women workers who participated in the discussions have been married and have children. These discussions were typically attended by four to eight people and were conducted every fortnight so that those who have children and families can join in the discussions.

Many things were discussed in this biweekly discussion, but the goal was to form a new union because the existing union has not been able to accommodate their needs, especially in terms of satisfying the basic rights of the workers. At one point after a meeting, I visited the house of a woman worker, C. At that time, I would like to see the housing conditions of women workers who live near the factory. On average, women workers live in nearby the factory and most of them also live with their parents in one household. They are usually responsible for domestic tasks, such as washing clothes, cooking, and so forth.

C’s house is located in a small alley next to the factory where C works as a worker on contract basis. She works from Monday to Friday, 7am to 7pm. She was 26-year-old at that time. She stays at her parent’s house with her husband who works as a driver of public transportation and her child who is still a toddler. C’s house has a pretty proper sanitation. From the terrace of her home, I could feel the sunshine came in through the leaves of the tree in her house’s yard.

Not too far from home C, there lives R, her sister who works at the same factory. My encounter with R opened my eyes to the practice of home-based labour experienced by many women working in that factory.

R was 25 years old at that time. R never joined the bi-weekly discussion meetings because she was busy doing “homework” from the factory. When I wanted to have a chat with her, R immediately took a sack and started do her “homework”. The “homework” was sewing a little long patchwork that have to be modeled like little flowers to be used as ornaments for the dolls produced by the factory. In order to get 10,000 IDR per sack or less then 1 $USD, R takes the “homework” every weekend and holiday. Typically, R spends a day (from morning till evening, 8am to 5pm) in doing this work. R always does the “homework” from the factory while taking care of her two children. R said that the “homework” is not required for everyone in the factory. However, most women workers take the “homework” because they consider that it is not a tough job and even R itself does not regard it as a job. In addition to an increase in income, during holiday, R can also do it while relaxing on the front porch while watching their children.

However, R also complained “when children get homework from school, they can be smart, because they will learn, but for me,” homework” makes me tired. But I have no choice; it’s not bad for additional income for my family.” She also told me that once she had to do the homework using candles as a source of light because the electricity was cut off from her house for a while since she was not able to pay the bills. As a contract worker, R also does not have a job security which explains why she has to take the “homework” in order to cover the basic necessities of life. Moreover, her husband worked odd jobs and therefore R becomes the primary breadwinner of the family.

---

17One of short narratives from observation and in-depth interview with one of women factory workers in Bogor who do the extra work from factory at her home.
Based on my preliminary research, there are some findings that can describe the condition of women working under home-based labour system. The findings are as follows:

Table of Preliminary Research Findings:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Women factory workers who do extra work from the factory at their home (a case study in Bogor)</th>
<th>Women housewives who do the work from the factory at their home (a case study in the region of South Tangerang)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Almost all of women factory workers who do extra work from the factory at their home are those who are married and have children. Very rare women factory workers who still single take extra work from the factory. The extra work from the factory mostly taken on holidays or on the weekend. However, many women factory workers also take on this extra work every weekdays.</td>
<td>Women housewives who do the work from the factory, mostly given job by their neighbors (also housewife) who received bulk orders from factory work in advance with big amount of work that. Work is carried out every working day (Monday to Friday), but this is can always be changed due to the factory needs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>The urgency of various necessities of life in the midst of their status as contract worker (as well as some being outsourced) who still earn wages below the minimum wage(^\text{18}), made women factory workers willing to take on extra work from the factory to do at home.</td>
<td>The urgency of the various necessities of life in the midst of their status as housewives who do not earn, make the women housewives willing to take orders from factory work to do at home.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Women factory workers who do extra work from the factory in their home did not consider that the extra work is a work as they did in the factory. In fact, they work on the same hours as they do in the factory.</td>
<td>With working hours that same as those who work in factories (8 to 12 hours), they think that this job is not a job as the main work of their husbands. They also often do the job orders from factory with asking their children who had come home from school (usually the afternoon) to help them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>In doing extra work from the factory, the women factory workers have to buy their own tools, such as needles and scissors.</td>
<td>In doing the work orders from this factory, the women housewives using tools (such as needles, scissors) that provided privately.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>With high workload and long working hours, women factory workers consider that inadequate income earn from extra work as a &quot;fad&quot; income.</td>
<td>Women housewives who work orders from factories at their home consider that the work is an extra work for their families and not the main occupation, although the main income of their families are often obtained from this work.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Women factory workers assume that extra work from their factory which they work at their home as a sideline activity that is not heavy for them. They take on this extra work because they considers this extra work can be completed while supervising their children. However, they acknowledge that this extra work are time-consuming and in fact they should be the focus on the work so that their children were still not supervised. This women factory worker, despite working in a factory,</td>
<td>The women housewives working on an order job from the factory still regard themselves as housewives and not women workers. They have consciousness as a housewife who should be able to take care of household well. Work that can be done in the home is considered better and it is only in addition to the main income of the family. In fact, they often become the breadwinner of the family amidst their husbands who do not have jobs.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^{18}\)Additionally, the wage received by these women workers is also still counted as wage for single and not for breadwinner wage, even they had married. This is different with man workers who get full breadwinner wage if they are married.
Women’s Work and Capitalism in Indonesia’s Context

In the midst of life difficulties faced by factory workers with contract (and outsourcing) status, such as low wages (below the minimum wage), lack of job security, and as well as women housewives (who are actually home-based workers), women factory workers are willing to spend their weekend and holiday to do some extra work from factory. With the aim to earn “extra income” and still have some spare time to taking care their children at home, they spend their leisure time to do extra work with very unworthy wages and long working hours. By using the “work and family balance”, capitalists are freely able to assure that the work load is just a little extra and is not same as the “work” or “job” they do in the factory. This explains why women housewives, who actually homeworkers, are also willing to do work with unlimited working hours and low wages.

Accordingly, from preliminary findings of this research, it can be seen that first, capitalism utilizes the discourse of “work and family balance” to launch a new strategy of capital accumulation by giving women factory workers additional work at home with working load and time as much as the one in the factory. They can use this opportunity with using the rhetoric of “work and family balance.” Moreover, capitalism also utilizes housewifization to establish a new capital accumulation strategy by providing manufacturing jobs to be done by women housewives who are actually home workers which has continue until today.

In No Place Like Home: Organizing Home-Based Labour in the Era of Structural Adjustment, David E. Staples explains that the capitalist logic for women who do not work outside their house or (called as unemployed women) is used to attract women into a new mode of production. Patriarchal capitalist conceptualization on women’s work and home is used to define what counts and what does not count as work. The division of labour at home which tend to be difficult to change also make capital utilizing patriarchal construction that positioning woman as the one who responsible in reproductive work that is in the house (at home).

Related to this, Leopoldina Fortunati in The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labour and Capital discusses about the relationship between women, labour, and female reproduction. Fortunati analyse labour in capitalism is the only commodity that can be sold by the workers to the capitalists. In this case, the worker sells their labour power as the only commodity that they only have. In capitalism, production of commodity is fundamental, including the production of labour power. However, the production process of labour power that is more known as reproduction process was regarded as a “natural” production process. Consequently, the reproductive process in creating labour power that is in personal (home) area is not recognized as work and just be the background of the production itself. In fact, the reproduction is the most important part of the mode of production itself. Production of labour power that are considered as “natural” in the reproduction process is intended to allow the capitalist to do not pay anything on it.  

Fathimah Fildzah, IZZATI
Women’s Work and Capitalism:
Housewifization and Home-based Labor in Indonesian Context

| keep doing household works such as washing, cooking and caring for children. Although they identify themselves as woman factory worker, but they have awareness/consciousness to keep balance their role as a worker and as a housewife. |
| No guarantee in any kind (including accidents and employment/job security) to do extra work at home that came from the factory. |

7. No guarantee in any kind (including accidents and employment/job security) to do extra work in works the order job from the factory.

---

In the end, reproduction appears as a process that is considered natural and does not produce anything with "use value". The process of reproduction actually gives result to labour power which has a very crucial position within capitalism. Besides Fortunati, Marxist feminist such as Maria Mies, Silvia Federici, and especially Lise Vogel, also view the work of women in capitalism always being positioned outside the mode of production, while the burden of social reproduction in which always ascribed to women is always developing in accordance with the existing mode of production. These conditions then allowed development of theories related to women and work in capitalism.

Then, the capital also take advantage of the patriarchal construction about mother’s work and extra income into the production process. Embodiments of the utilization of patriarchal ideology into production processes, among others, can be seen in the increasingly widespread phenomenon of women home workers. In the home-based work, the women-mostly-housewives work the bulk of factory jobs with low wages and high work hours. According to Staples, women home workers has entered into a scheme of production in factories. Staples stressed that political studies regarding home workers is the key to answer problem of invisibility (hiddenness) of women's work. By utilizing the patriarchal construction about what is defined as "working women", home-based work then offer the concept of "work at home" as the answer to the housewife on a "balance between work and family." In the concept of "work at home" there is a dimension of work flexibility as well as high utilization of patriarchal space for capital accumulation. Such circumstances increasing massively in which move in line with global financialization; various financial transactions run faster, which in turn affects the movement of capital.

In the context of developing countries, the global situation of accumulation cannot be processed without any political-economic pressure in the form of structural adjustment policies.20 Washington Consensus has forced developing countries to restructure their domestic market and the economy as a condition for continuing their international loans from international financial institutions. The free market as a consequence of arrangement of the domestic market and the economy was inevitable and mostly entered by women through work in factory sweatshops and/or "inside home".21

Home-based women workers also do the bulk of factory work at home and still identify themselves as housewives. Once again it is related to domestic work as an invisible work. Because patriarchy constructs such work as the primary task of the housewife, then it is not considered as work. In this case, according to Staples, home and work are in opposites ideologically. Although the number of homeworkers worldwide almost reach 300 million people22, women are not seen as workers but still as a housewife and their position at outside the labour force. Staples put forward the concept of "house as home, that is space as place", to reveal the patriarchal construction about "better suppressed in their own homes than outside the home and not by people who are known (in this case, at home by the husband). Housewifization is an attempt of capitalism to exploit women labour by utilizing the patriarchal constructions of women, thus making women submissive and follow the workflow of capital accumulation scheme.23 As a result, in addition to women's work is considered invisible, women home-based workers were difficult to organize themselves into a union, because the spatial home restricting their ability to gather and tend to be atomized.

---

21Ibid.
22Ibid.
The increasing number of women who work outside the home still does not change the construction about woman "nature" in doing work inside the home. In other words, although women work outside the home, women's primary obligation is still remain in the house. In the context of Indonesia, in addition to the mother-housewife, capitalists also ensnare women factory workers to do extra work from factory by using the discourse of "work and family balance". In this case, the discourse of balance between work and family, intensifying the vulnerability of life as a result of LMF, as well as the use of the home as the locus/workplace for women, has made many women workers, not least women factory workers, willing to sacrifice their spare time to do extra work from the factory after they work and when the holidays arrive, in their respective homes.

In this case, the problem of intimacy with children is not a major problem, the problem is the imposition of the maintenance of the child in the hands of women only. According to Dalla Costa, the solution to child being in which burden always just pinned on women, is not by moving the work space of women from domestic to the public without solving the problem of domestication of women within household itself. So the problem is not in a matter of "choice" in which women work, and so on, but on the issue of structural conditions which allows women to make those choices.

Summary

Ensnared under capitalist and patriarchal hegemony, what women do, especially housewives, in the house often times is not considered as work. Housewifization is promoted vigorously by capitalism in order to accelerate the accumulation of capital by utilizing the patriarchal construction of the work of women at home and the increasing need to find extra income. The discourse on "the balance between work and family" is not an effective solution since it does not address the root causes of oppression experienced by women. The discourse even negates the power of women to fight the root causes of female subordination under capitalism. If such a discourse is maintained, the existing position of women in the reproductive and production cycles will remain intact. Capitalism can very easily use it to exploit women, both inside and outside the domestic sphere.

Works Cited


