

The Limitations of Social Reproduction Theory in Explaining Social Unpaid Work in the Global South

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Abstract: This paper defines and explores the concept of social reproduction work, highlighting its significance and the fact that women are its primary contributors. It identifies key social issues faced by social reproduction workers, including marginalization, neglect, and unequal access to resources. Additionally, the study examines the primary challenges encountered by these workers: the lack of direct economic benefits, difficulty in balancing work and family responsibilities, and the significant physical and mental strain associated with unpaid labor. Using the theoretical framework of the capitalist economic system, the paper delves into the root causes of the caregiving crisis. Furthermore, it critiques the applicability of reproduction work theories in explaining unpaid care work in the Global South. Three key limitations are outlined: the neglect of informal economic systems in the Global South, persistent gender inequality, and the dynamic nature of global economic migration.

Keywords: Sociology; Social reproduction; Care work

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1. Introduction

Research on unpaid work is particularly significant in the Global South, where economic systems are predominantly informal. Since the majority of individuals engaged in unpaid work are women, studying this phenomenon can uncover the root causes of their exploitation and highlight gender inequalities. Moreover, it provides valuable insights into the mechanisms and principles that sustain capitalist dominance. This understanding can help deconstruct unpaid care work and contribute to advancing gender justice in the Global South. This form of labor, which supports economic sustainability, is referred to as social reproduction work. Social reproduction work serves as the foundation of capitalism. While unpaid workers do not directly generate economic value, they play an essential role by continually supplying resources to the labor market and providing logistical support, such as cooking and childcare^[1]. Cooking addresses the fundamental need for human survival, enabling families to engage in direct economic activities, while raising children ensures a steady

supply of labor for the market. However, despite its critical contribution to sustaining the capitalist system, the value of unpaid labor remains significantly underestimated, which perpetuates the marginalization of women^[2]. Although social reproduction theory highlights the limitations of the capitalist economic system, it fails to fully account for the complexity of unpaid labor in the Global South. This paper argues that while social reproduction theory explains certain aspects of unpaid labor in the Global South, its heavy focus on wage labor within capitalist frameworks neglects the region's unique economic and social dynamics, rendering it insufficient for a comprehensive understanding of unpaid labor in this context.

2. Literature review

Regarding social reproduction in the Global north, Fraser^[2] critiqued capitalism for commercializing care work. This development aligns with the essence of capitalism, which commodifies most social behaviors, transforming care from an unpaid familial responsibility into a service available through market mechanisms. For instance, consider a family consisting of a couple and a child. The father works to earn an income, while the mother engages in social reproduction work, such as cooking and caring for the child. When the child matures and enters the labor market, the mother's labor indirectly contributes to the economy. If the mother finds her caregiving responsibilities manageable, she might consider having another child, thereby increasing the labor supply for the capitalist system. However, under capitalism, women engaged in unpaid care work often face rising financial pressures, compelling them to seek employment that directly generates economic value. Balancing paid work with unpaid caregiving becomes an immense challenge for these women.

Here, the commodification of unpaid care work within the capitalist system becomes evident. As care work must still be performed, market solutions such as hiring nannies and housekeepers, and utilizing daycare services emerge. While this outsourcing alleviates some burdens, it also heightens unpaid workers' reliance on external care services, exacerbating their physical and mental stress^[2]. Fraser acknowledged that social reproduction is integral to the continuous accumulation of capital. However, capitalism's insatiable drive to monetize social reproduction undermines the very processes that sustain its existence. By commercializing care work, capitalism creates a dependency on paid caregiving services while simultaneously neglecting the structural support required for unpaid laborers. This imbalance leads to a care deficit, threatening the continuation of the capitalist system itself. Fraser's insights effectively illuminate the dynamics of social reproduction, particularly its dual role as both a cornerstone of capitalism and a source of its inherent contradictions. Her analysis highlights how capitalism's exploitation of care work ultimately jeopardizes the system's long-term stability by fostering a care crisis.

3. Discussion

Social reproduction theory provides an explanation of how unpaid care work sustains the process of social reproduction while simultaneously challenging the capitalist economic system. However, this explanation largely applies to the Global North and fails to adequately address the issue of unpaid care work in the Global South. The commodification of social reproduction work, a defining feature in the Global North, does not exist in the Global South, where no mature care work labor market system is present. Instead, care work in the Global South is predominantly carried out by family members rather than market labor, such as nannies. Consequently, social reproduction labor in the Global South remains largely unmarketized. This oversight in Fraser's view is a significant limitation, as it fails to account for the unique social and economic dynamics of the Global South.

While care work in the capitalist economies of the Global North has been commodified, this is not mirrored in the Global South, where informal economic systems prevail. Unpaid care work remains a heavy burden on local women, and Fraser's analysis does not fully capture this reality. This constitutes the first limitation of applying social reproduction theory to the Global South: the theory's inability to address the fundamentally different economic systems in the region. Clearly, the theoretical framework of the capitalist system is insufficient to explain the realities of unpaid labor in the Global South.

The second limitation of social reproduction theory lies in its neglect of the serious gender issues prevalent in the Global South. Laslett and Brenner introduced the "male breadwinner" model, which describes middle-class families where only men participate in wage labor to support the household, while working-class families see both men and women participating in market labor^[1]. For working-class women, this dual role—balancing both domestic labor and waged labor—results in significant pressure. Feminists have criticized social reproduction theory for its Marxist-like emphasis on economic factors while ignoring the critical role of gender in social reproduction. They argue that gender inequality is central to understanding the dynamics of unpaid care work, as women disproportionately shoulder the burden of social reproduction, which is inherently unfair. In the Global South, women face additional challenges due to inadequate social protections, pushing many into informal workplaces and further exacerbating gender inequality^[3]. In some countries, women are still restricted from pursuing certain occupations, such as those in manufacturing, construction, and transportation^[4]. A stereotype has emerged that frames women as being inherently suited to family responsibilities, perpetuating the notion that they are less capable of handling complex tasks. This stereotype often hinders women's career advancement, as higher positions typically demand significant time and energy, adding to the burden of family responsibilities. Women, therefore, face "double pressure" as they juggle professional and domestic roles.

Despite these challenges, more women are participating in paid labor. For instance, the proportion of women in the U.S. labor force increased from 30% in 1950 to 59% in 2011^[3]. However, the care crisis, exacerbated by financial capitalism, has intensified the demand for labor without providing adequate support for care tasks like parenting and household management^[2]. This mismatch between economic demand and people's capacity to meet it has increased the pressure on women who must balance both work and social reproduction responsibilities. In summary, unpaid labor in the Global South remains largely outside the commercial domain, with social reproduction work predominantly undertaken within families. This amplifies the severity of gender inequality in the region. Social reproduction theory, however, focuses primarily on economic principles and processes, neglecting the critical role of gender. As a result, it falls short of fully explaining the essence of social reproduction, particularly in the Global South.

The third limitation of social reproduction theory is its narrow focus on local contexts, which overlooks the dynamic phenomenon of global labor migration. Many migrant women take on low-wage care jobs abroad, particularly as women from the Global South migrate to the Global North, shifting social reproduction work into the commercial sphere. This shift creates significant care gaps^[5], intensifying the strain on unpaid care work in the Global South and making it increasingly challenging to sustain social activities. However, social reproduction theory fails to account for this global dynamic, particularly the complexities introduced by global migration, which exacerbate the challenges of social reproduction in the Global South. Moreover, the theory emphasizes the regulatory role of governments in the reproduction process, noting their recognition of the "care deficit"^[2] and their attempts to intervene. However, such intervention is predominantly observed in the Global North and remains largely absent in the Global South.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, while social reproduction theory provides insights into unpaid work in the Global South, it fails to fully address its complexities. The theory has notable limitations, including its disregard for the informal economic systems in the Global South, persistent gender inequalities, and the dynamics of global economic migration. Thus, although social reproduction theory sheds light on certain aspects of unpaid work in the Global South, relying on a single theoretical framework to explain economic phenomena across fundamentally different economic systems is inadequate.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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