

erase their personhood and throw over the wants of the body and the hunger of the soul for transformation. The adventure of being fully human, however, cannot be achieved simultaneously with the denial of the self – and it is this denial of female selfhood, this denial of the dirt and ooze of female power, that feminists of all genders and stripes must resist if we are to root out the deepest lines of misogynist resistance in our societies.

Society cannot grow and develop if it continues to insist that one half of its citizens spend their energies physically and psychologically shrinking themselves. But reclaiming the flesh is about radical surrender to female power, and this will be as hard for many women, grown used to denying and paring down their bodies and their selves, as it will be for the men who must make room for those bodies and those selves. This strategy goes far beyond individual women leaning to love their bodies. Empowerment is about far more than physical self-confidence, whatever the cosmetic surgery industry may claim.

Perhaps the cruellest of all tricks played on women by contemporary consumerism is the tendency over the past five years for popular culture to appropriate women's anxiety over taking up social space in order to sell them circumscribed solutions. Even as dieting is sold as the ultimate way for women to positively transform their lives, TV programmes like Britain's *How to Look Good Naked* prey on those same fear by suggesting that all women really need to feel free from the tyrannies of body fascism is a really great bra and the chance to stand on a stage and be judged approvingly by men. When I began to eat again and started to approach a healthy weight, I was bombarded with compliments. The few friends I hadn't managed to alienate through years of self-starvation rushed to reassure me that I was more attractive as a size eight than I had been as a size zero. I went to bed with men who told me that they loved my curves, thinking that this was what I wanted to hear. I tried desperately hard to love my curves, too – but the real breakthrough came when I stopped defining myself merely by my dress size. Once

I started to believe that my worth as a person had nothing to do with how my body looked to other people, I began to give myself permission to take up the space I needed and claim the power I craved.

Fear of female flesh is fear of female power, and reclaiming women's bodies must go hand in hand with reclaiming women's power. This cannot be achieved simply by purchasing expensive body lotion. Men and women alike need to confront our fear of female flesh, to risk being overwhelmed by the power of women to change society and take charge of their own lives. All we need to do is acknowledge how hungry we are for that future to arrive, and take the first bite.

3

Gender Capital

Sex class is so deep as to be invisible.

Shulamith Firestone

The eroto-capitalist fear of female flesh has translated into a fight for gender itself. What is girlhood, after all, but shoes, clothes and conspicuous consumption? When femininity is intimately tied into the labour of objectification, the cues of gender itself can be bought and sold on the labour market. As such, any woman wishing to free herself from the mechanisms of misogyny imperils her socially-constructed sex. Why else are feminists so consistently de-sexed in the popular imagination?

Feminism is construed as a threat to femininity when it is, in fact, a threat to gender as labour capital. Women of all ages who fear identifying with feminism cite the popular stereotype of feminists as hairy-legged, loose-breasted, man-hating or man-repelling lesbians who wear that most thuggishly androgynous of sartorial statements, dungarees. The stereotype has persisted for a reason: because it terrorises women with the fear that *radical politics will destroy their sexuality and gender identity.*

Powerful women in the public eye, especially those who lobby for women's rights, are subjected to tirades about their supposedly 'masculine' appearance and behaviour. Women fear abandoning our performative and submissive behaviours because we fear losing our sex. This is a legitimate fear. Women's liberation does indeed constitute a challenge to the capitalist construction of gendered labour, however pleasant it may be to imagine that feminism can be done in five-hundred-dollar Manolos.

The second-wave feminine essential

Second-wave feminism posited a reclamation of the feminine essential as an answer to the submissive, spayed, stilettoed stereotype of misogynist fantasy. An understanding that women's bodies are arrogated spaces of political control made it easy for feminism to fall back on female body essentialism as the solution to patriarchal power. The notion, first posited by second-wave feminists, is that that behind the misogynist packaging of shoes, shopping and bland sexual stereotyping there is a 'real' feminine essential, centred in the 'real' female body, that would heal the hurt of centuries of oppression if we could only access it. This notion is utterly misplaced.

A **fantasy feminine essential**, set against patriarchal feminine constructions and placed in binary opposition to the masculine, was never going to be an adequate foil to the machinations of capitalist patriarchy. The feminine as fact and as ideology is too dispersed and too pervasive for any one 'feminist' physicality to suffice. Too often, bodily essentialism disguises a retreat: a retreat from the politics of capital and labour, a retreat from the broader structures of women's oppression, and a retreat from the true complexities of gender and sexuality. It is not enough, in short, to reclaim the female body as a site of power: we must also ask what the female body is, who has one, and how it is made.

Transsexual dialectics

Germaine Greer wrote in *The Female Eunuch* that "The castration of women has been carried out in terms of a masculine-feminine polarity." The appropriate response to psychological castration, however, is not aggressive maintenance of that polarity – nor can sex alone hold back the rampant, sterilising frigidity of capitalist gender ideals.

The inadequacy of logic in traditional feminist thought about

gender and sex is most self-evident when we come, as we must, to the trans question.

The ideological status of trans women has rent stultifying schisms in feminist dialectic. High-profile thinkers such as Mary Daly, Germaine Greer, Janice Raymond, Julie Bindel and even Gloria Steinem have spoken out against what Greer terms “people who think they are women, have women’s names, and feminine clothes and lots of eyeshadow, who seem to us to be some kind of ghastly parody.”

Some prominent radical feminists have publicly declared that trans women are misogynist, “mutilated men” in awkward dresses attempting to violently penetrate the sacred space of female physical mystery. Greer’s orthodoxy that trans women are simply men who seek surgery because they believe that womanhood is akin to male castration has been supplemented with charges that trans people are merely repressed homosexuals who would rather change their physical sex than live in same-sex relationships. Raymond, who was active in campaigns to deny federal funding to sex-change surgery and to force trans women out of influential roles in women’s culture, claimed that trans women are “trojan horses of the patriarchy”, committing rape by their very existence.¹²

Transsexual people have responded to this harassment by demanding that anti-trans feminists be denied platforms to speak on other issues and, in some cases, by renouncing feminism altogether. The deep personal and ideological wounds inflicted on both sides of the argument are reopened with vigour every time the mainstream press gives space to an anti-trans article by a cis (non-transsexual) feminist.

Many otherwise sensible and learned feminists have fallen prey to lazy transphobic thinking. In the vast majority of cases, feminist transphobia does not stem from deep, personal hatred of trans people, but from drastic, tragic ideological misapprehension of the issues at stake. In 2009, Julie Bindel declared in an article for Standpoint magazine: “The Gender Recognition Act [a UK act

which allows people to change sex and be issued with a new birth certificate] will have a profoundly negative effect on the human rights of women and children.” Her views are founded on the assumption that “transsexualism, by its nature, promotes the idea that it is ‘natural’ for boys to play with guns and girls to play with Barbie dolls... the idea that gender roles are biologically determined rather than socially constructed is the antithesis of feminism.”¹³

Bindel and others have, initially with the best of intentions, misunderstood not only the nature of transsexualism but also the radical possibilities for gender revolution that real, sisterly alliance between cis feminists and the trans movement could entail.

Binary femininity is a social construct and anti-trans feminists are right to identify it as such: human biology is not subject to cultural norms of gender polarity, and there is a small but significant no-man’s land of people who are intersex and hermaphrodite between the male and female sexes. When it comes to re-enforcing damaging stereotypes, however, trans men and women are no guiltier than cis men and women. In fact, the misogyny and sexist stereotyping that Bindel identifies as associated with trans identities are entirely imposed on the trans community by external forces.

Sally Outen, a trans rights campaigner, explains: “It is only natural for a person who strongly wishes to be identified according to her or his felt gender to attempt to provide cues to make the process easy for those who interact with her or him. That person cannot be blamed for the stereotypical nature of the cues that society uses, or if they can be blamed, then every cisgendered person who uses such cues is equally to blame.”

Even a casual assessment of the situation indicates that the problem lies not with transsexual people, but with our entire precarious construction of what is ‘male’ and what ‘female’, ‘masculine’ and ‘feminine’. Bindel’s description of trans women in “fuck-me-boots and birds-nest hair” are no different from today’s bewildered 12-, 13- and 14-year-old cissexual girls struggling to make the transition from deeply felt, little-understood womanhood

to socially dictated, artificial 'femininity'. Like teenage girls stuffing their bras with loo-roll and smearing on garish lipstick, the trans women for whom Bindel, Greer and their ilk reserve special disdain are simply craving what most growing girls crave: the pathological trappings of gendered social acceptance.

Amy, a 41-year-old trans woman, says: "Transition in later life is a really weird experience, in that you're suddenly and unexpectedly plunged into being teenage, plus you have teenage levels of female hormones coursing through your veins. You haven't grown up through the sidling-toward-teenagerhood that girls get, the socialisation and the immersion in society's expectations and realities. Trans women get to learn those, just a quarter of a century late, in my case. The results tend to be a bit wild." Or, as one cis friend of mine put it: "If I'd had the income that some trans people do when I was a teenager, I'd have owned a cupboard full of fuck-me-boots."

Buying and selling gender

The fact that socially acceptable female identity is something that must be purchased and imposed artificially on the flesh is something that trans women understand better than anyone else. If we locate contemporary patriarchal oppression within the mechanisms of global capitalism, the experience of trans women, who can find themselves pressured to spend large amounts of money in order to 'pass' as female, is a more urgent version of the experience of cis women under patriarchal capitalism. In Western societies, where shopping for clothes and makeup is a key coming-of-age ritual for cis women, all people wishing to express a female identity must grapple with the brutal dictates of the beauty, diet, advertising and fashion industries in order to 'pass' as female.

Whilst radical acceptance of mess and fluids and flesh are part of the ideological core of feminist resistance, the biological feminine

essentialism of anti-trans feminists and conservatives alike is misplaced. In truth, not a single person on this planet is born a woman. Becoming a woman, for those who willingly or unwillingly submit to the process, is torturous, magical, bewildering and utterly politicised. In the essay "Mama Cash: Buying and Selling Genders", trans author Charlie Anders explains: "Transgender people... understand more than anyone the high cost of gender, having adopted identities as adult neophytes. People often work harder than they think to maintain the boy/girl behaviours expected of them. You may have learned through painful trial-and-error not to use certain phrases, or to walk a certain way. After a while, learned gender behaviour becomes almost second nature, like trying to compensate for a weak eye. Again, transgender people are just experiencing what everyone goes through."¹⁴

The concept and practice of sex reassignment surgery (SRS) is the territory over which 'radical' feminists and trans activists traditionally clash most painfully. Bindel, along with others, believes that the fact that SRS is carried out at all means "we've given up on the distress felt by people who identify as gender dysphoric, and turned to surgery instead of trying to find ways to make people feel good in the bodies they have."

Bindel makes the case that the SRS 'industry' is part of a social discourse in which homosexual and gender-non-conforming men and women are brought back into line by "psychiatrists who think that carving people's bodies up can somehow make them 'normal'". Were SRS an accepted way of policing the boundaries of gender non-conformity here, Bindel, Daly, Greer and Raymond's equation of the surgery with 'mutilation' would be more than valid - it would be urgent. However, SRS is nothing of the sort.

In fact, SRS is carried out only very rarely, and only on a small proportion of trans people, for whom the surgery is not a strategy for bringing their body in line with their gender performativity but a way of healing a distressing physical dissonance that Outen vividly describes as "a feeling like I was being raped by my own unwanted

anatomy”.

Surgery is normally a late stage of the transitioning process and falls within a spectrum of lifestyle choices - for those who opt for it at all. Trans activist Christine Burns points out:

Julie Bindel is quite right that we ought to be able to build a society where people can express the nuances of their gender far more freely, without feeling any compulsion to have to change their bodies more than they really want to.

However, that is precisely what many trans people really do. Only one in five of the people who go to gender clinics have reassignment surgery - the other four in five find accommodations with what they've got. Bindel's thinking cannot admit that, far from emphasising the binary, 80% of trans people are doing far more to disrupt gender stereotypes than she imagines. With or without surgery, trans people are living examples of the fact that gender is variable and fluid.

Of course, like any other surgery, SRS has its risks, and a minority of patients will regret the procedure. But for most of the trans people who decide to pursue SRS, the operation allows for potentially life-saving progression beyond the debilitating effects of gender dysphoria. Moreover, many post-operative trans people have found that the operation actually lessens their overall distress around binary gender identity. Amy explains: “Being female is an important part of my identity, but it's not an all-consuming part any more. Until I transitioned and completed surgery, it was much more so. I woke up from surgery, and the burning dissonance, the feeling of everything being wrong, wasn't there any more. These days, I realise that I don't actually have that strong a sense of gender any more. Isn't that strange, given all I went through to get here?”

The radical gender fluidity within the trans movement is exactly what Bindel, when I spoke to her in the process of writing this book, emphasised above everything else: “Normality is horrific. Normality is what I, as a political activist, am trying to turn around. Gender bending, people living outside their prescribed gender roles,

is fantastic - and I should know. I've never felt like a woman, or like a man for that matter - I don't know what that's supposed to mean. I live outside of my prescribed gender roles, I'm not skinny and presentable, I don't wear makeup, I'm bolshie, I don't behave like a 'real woman', and like anyone who lives outside their prescribed gender roles, I get stick for it.”

What Bindel has failed to grasp is that trans people, far from “seeking to become stereotypical”, are often as eager to live outside their prescribed gender roles as she is, and just as frustrated by the conformity that a misogynist society demands from those who wish to 'pass'. Marija Erwin told me that “gender identity and gender roles are not the same. I am trans, and I am not the hyperfeminine stereotype. I am a tweener dyke and more butch than femme. I know other trans womyn who are solidly butch, and others who are totally femme, and, of course, the equivalents among straight and bi womyn.”

Much of the stereotyping imposed upon trans women is enforced by sexist medical establishments - a phenomenon which radical feminists and trans activists are unanimous in decrying. Bindel, like many trans feminists, objects to the fact that psychiatrists are “allowed to define the issue of gender deviance”, giving medical professionals social and ideological influence beyond their professional remit. Clinics in the UK require trans people to fulfil a rigid set of box-ticking gender-performance criteria before they will offer treatment and SRS demands this conformity with special rigour. To receive SRS, trans women patients will normally be expected to have 'lived as a woman' for two years or more - but individual psychiatrists and doctors will get to decide what 'living as a woman' entails. A UK psychiatrist is known to have refused treatment because a trans woman patient turned up to an appointment wearing trousers, whilst Kasper, a trans man who was treated in Norway, was pressured to stop dating men by surgery gatekeepers. “I had to answer a lot of invasive questions about my sexuality and my sex life, and one of the doctors I had to see lectured

me about how transitioning physically might make me stop being attracted to boys," he says.

The demand that trans people conform to gender stereotypes in order to be considered 'healthy' or 'a good treatment prospect' is part of an experience that cis women also experience in their dealings with the psychiatric profession. It is standard practice for women in some inpatient treatment facilities to be pressured to wear makeup and dresses as a sign of 'psychological improvement'.

Real female bodies?

Feminists – even prominent ones with big platforms to shout from – do not get to be the gatekeepers of what is and is not female, what is and is not feminine, any more than patriarchal apologists do. Intrinsic to feminism is the notion that such gatekeeping is sexist, recalcitrant and damaging. If feminists like Greer, Bindel and Jan Raymond truly believe that having a vagina, breasts, curves, a uterus, being fertile or sporting several billion XX chromosomes is what makes a person a woman, it clearly sucks to be one of the significant proportion of women who have none of these things.

There are women all over the world who lack breasts following mastectomy or a quirk of biology; women who are born without vaginas, or who are victims of female genital mutilation; women who are androgynously skinny, naturally or because of illness; women who have had hysterectomies; women who are infertile or post-menopausal; or the vast spectrum of women who are biologically intersex, who make up 0.2% of women worldwide. Is the female identity of these people under question too? If it is, feminism has a long way to go.

Greer and her followers seem singularly uninterested in the science behind their binary thinking, which establishes that prescribed gender roles still fall largely into the binary categories of 'man' and 'woman', but human bodies do no such thing. The

spectrum of human physicality **belies binary** gender essentialism – as must feminism, if it is ever to be the revolutionary movement our culture so desperately needs.

Trans activism is not merely a valid part of the feminist movement: it is a vital one. The notion that one's biological sex does not have to dictate anything about one's behaviour, appearance or the eventual layout of one's genitals and secondary sex organs, now that we live in a glittering future where such things are possible, is the radical heart of feminist thought.

At the very heart of sexist thought is the notion that the bodies we are born with ought to dictate our character, our behaviour, our appearance, our choices, the nature of our relationships and the work of our lives. Feminism puts forward the still-radical notion that this is not the case. Feminism holds that gender identity, rather than being written in our genes, is an emotional, personal and sexual state of being that can be expressed in myriad different ways that encompass and extend beyond the binary categories of 'man' and 'woman'. Feminism holds that prescribed gender roles are a tyranny that no-one – whether trans, cis, male, female or intersex – should be forced to conform to in order to prove their identity, their validity or their human worth.

Trans feminist revolutions

Feminism calls for gender revolution, and gender revolution needs the trans movement. We must put aside the hurts of the past and look towards a future of radical solidarity between all those who are troubled by gender in the modern world. Whatever our differences, until contemporary feminism fully and finally accepts trans people as ideological allies, it will never achieve what Germaine Greer, Gloria Steinem, Christine Burns, Sally Outen and every feminist who has ever longed for a better world are all working towards: an end to the damaging and demeaning tyranny of gender stereotypes

and a coherent resistance to bodily marginalisation.

What part of female experience do trans women not know? How to bleed between the legs? How to adopt a posture of subservience in order to be accepted as one's felt gender? How to ape commercial sexuality and spend money on the trappings of femininity as sanctioned by the overculture? How to perform, and how to long for the freedom to be oneself without having to perform? Trans women know all of these things, many of them better than cis women, because they have had to fight at every turn even for the constrained right to consumer femininity. All women have to fight for gender capital; trans women merely start out in debit.

The one thing that most trans women largely do not experience is reproductive tyranny, the obscenity of living in a culture that tries to stamper itself all over one's womb and clamp itself around one's ovaries and shame XX-genotype women for owning bodies that can create new life. I have stood on too many protest lines beside transsexual women, screaming together for the right to legal abortion on demand and after forty years of fighting, to imagine for one second that this is a part of women's oppression that trans women do not understand. The struggle for medical and legal recognition of trans women's needs and the struggle for medical and legal recognition of a woman's right to choose are part of the same dialectic of wresting back bodily control over women's bodies.

Trans women and transvestites are despised by gender fascists because they do something unforgivable: they take the rules of the game and they make them explicit. They show that femininity is a mode of being that can and must be purchased. They take the sexual sell and they make it manifest, with the courage and ingenuity that often comes from feeling oneself an outsider from the first. And for this reason, almost as a form of patriarchal revenge, violence is enacted upon the bodies of trans women with frequency and force experienced by no other group of women apart from those who work in the sex trade.

Transsexual women and women who sell sex own bodies which

are explicitly – rather than implicitly – part of the brutal capitalist exchange of gender signs. It is seen as somehow apt that these women should apologise for themselves. It is seen as somehow understandable that violence should be done to them on a scale unimaginable even for cis women. Across the world, prostitutes and transsexual women are murdered at horrifying rates. In a recent report for the police district of Columbia, it was estimated that 10–20% of all violent hate crime was targeted at trans women, despite the relatively small size of the trans community in the area.¹⁵ Trans women are murdered so frequently that since 1998, a dedicated day of remembrance has been held every year on November the 20th to draw international attention to the problem of violence against trans people.

Writer and trans activist Julia Serano memorably called attention to trans women as the “whipping girls” of Western culture.¹⁶ The bodies of transsexual women are marginalised and punished precisely because they expose the mechanisms by which the modern carapace of gender capital is maintained, threatening its hold over women's bodies.

4

Dirty Work

The most elementary demand is not the right to work or receive equal pay for work, but the right to equal work itself

Juliet Mitchell

Marginalised bodies do marginalised work. Bodies that are arrogated and controlled to do work that is underpaid and overlooked. Slavemaking is a social science, and nowhere is that science more expertly demonstrated than in the continued ability of contemporary industrial culture to persuade women perform the vast majority of vital domestic and caring labour without expecting reward or payment.

After a century of feminism, women still do the lion's share of caring, cooking and cleaning duties, for free. Nowadays, we are also encouraged to do 'real' work – i.e., work traditionally done by men, outside the home – on top of these domestic duties, albeit for less pay and fewer rewards. In 2003, British women still performed an average of nineteen hours' worth of housework per week, compared with only five hours for men, whose share of the domestic burden has remained essentially unchanged since the early 1980s.¹⁷ Whilst unemployment and retirement decreased the number of hours spent by men on domestic work, they increased women's hours.

Women's work-relationship to their bodies mirrors our work-relationship to our homes: we labour at great personal cost to gild our cages, our increasing resentment tempered by fear of the social consequences of refusal. This fear is engendered in us by patriarchal capitalism, which would have everything to lose were women to once refuse to perform for free all the boring domestic work vital to support alienated industrial labour. We tidy away the messy reality of our bodies just as we tidy away the grim reality of domestic toil, because have been schooled to fear losing our womanhood, losing

our identity, if we refuse to shape up and clean house, no matter what our other engagements of paid work and social interaction may be. Modern women are told that we can have it all, which in practice means that *we must and should do it all – with a smile, and for free.*

There was once a dedicated movement, tied in to Marxist feminism, to change the labour conditions of working women across the world. This movement petered out in the 1980s, despite the fact that the labour dispute on the domestic front was never close to being won. Instead, men and women have retreated into a grim stalemate, and many find themselves standing on a picket line that extends across every home, from the sink to the washing machine to the kids' bedrooms. Before we set up homes together, we may not be aware that this picket line exists, but the strategic socio-sexual marginalisation of women's bodies makes it seem somehow natural and right that all the dirty, messy work of the home should be performed by women for low pay or no pay. Women are seen as animalistic, manipulable, and born to be low-paid workers; because we see ourselves in that way too, we capitulate – we abandon our resistance in effect, we scab.

Domestic drudgery is a capitalist construction

Whilst researching this chapter I interviewed Western women of all ages and classes who were balancing domestic labour with paid, 'real' work, and my overwhelming impression was one of defeatism and paralysis. Women, whether or not they identify as feminists, feel guilty about the state of our homes in the same way that we feel guilty about the state of our bodies – we feel ashamed of being seen to have somehow lost control, to be insufficiently worthy of our womanhood as socially interpreted. "Not being able to keep one's house clean still suggests complete breakdown," says Lucy, 38, a full-time mother. "Every time a stranger comes to my door I worry that

they are glancing past me at the grubby porch, and sofa covered in dog-fur and thinking, 'that woman has lost control of her life.' I feel like if my elderly neighbour looks in, she'll think I'm a failure as a woman." The feminization of domestic labour makes it seem at once trivial and an essential part of female identity. Housework and childcare are not real work, because women do them – and because they are done by women, whose bodies are marginalised to the point of unreality, they are not real work.

In fact, domestic labour is not at all trivial. Without the work that women do for free, every western economy would collapse within days. In the United States, the money that women should in theory be owed for their unpaid caring and domestic work runs to some six times the national defence budget, and the US defence budget is not small.

There is a word for what happens when you trap someone within the confines of a house and make them work for no reward for generations and tell them that they're good for nothing else. There's a word for what happens when generations of children of both sexes are raised in environments underpinned by resentment and the control dynamics essential to getting women's work done for nothing. There's a word for what happens when home and work in the home becomes indelibly associated with self-negation, abuse and stifled rage, and the word is trauma. The entirety of Western society is still traumatised by our complex relationship to the economics of domestic labour. No family truly escapes.

To understand why we are so dreadfully messed up when it comes to the entire sphere of life involving necessary care and self-care, it's vital to comprehend that we are living in a culture that has been traumatised – emotionally, physically, sexually and psychologically traumatised. At the 2009 Compass Conference women's seminar, speakers from the floor asked why housework is still so undervalued. It is undervalued because we have, slowly but surely, turned home itself into a locus of slavery, suffering and trauma. No wonder men are scared of scrubbing floors. Feminism

did not do this.

The c-word: rewriting history.

Capitalism is the essential context for understanding the marginalisation of women's bodies within the home. It was, after all, industrial capitalism which created and perpetuated the conditions for the degradation of housework and the degradation of women by association.

Historians such as Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall have described how separate spheres for men and women emerged between 1780 and 1850 as the workplace became separated from the home and a private, domestic sphere was created for women, formally and symbolically severing the processes of production and reproduction.¹⁸ The simple work of creating and sustaining life does not fit within the profit-oriented, pay-and-target driven capitalist imagining of society, but that work still had to be done, and it had to be done away from the factory floor, which after child labour laws came into force over the first half of the 19th century was officially declared no place for children. Thus, in 1737 over 98 per cent of married women in England worked outside the home, but by 1911 over 90 per cent were employed solely as housewives. Ivan Illich calls this process "the enclosure of women".¹⁹

The divorce of the domestic front from the public world of profit-oriented work and citizenship was reaffirmed by important new legal sanctions: married women were officially forbidden from owning property or making contracts, shutting them out from the world of business, and the 1832 Reform Bill made women's exclusion from political citizenship explicit for the first time, formally isolating women within the confines of the home.

In her editorial to *New Internationalist's* issue on the politics of housework, Debbie Taylor explains that "though domestic work has existed ever since there was a domus in which to do it, the housewife

role is a very recent one indeed – and confined to industrialized societies.²⁰ As sociologist Anne Oakley put it, “other cultures may live in families but they do not necessarily have housewives. They have women, men and children whose labour is woven together like coloured thread in a tapestry, creating home, life and livelihood for the whole family.”²¹ As it became necessary for domestic work to be shoehorned cheaply into the profit-margins of industrial society, history was rapidly rewritten to ensure the acceptance of housework as woman’s divinely decreed role.

Just as this brutal domestic binary was made concrete, Darwin careered into the ideological landscape, crushing amongst other things the old Judeo-Christian excuses for female domesticity. A new logical basis for housework was needed, and fast. So the ‘hunter-gatherer’ myths of human prehistoric development as extricated from the Christian imagining of history began to be phrased explicitly as dichotomy: male hunters versus female gatherers. Even the importance to some academic schools of the idea of human society as matriarchal and goddess-worshipping in the Paleolithic era has not diminished the notion that early female ‘gathering’ involved childcare, cooking, sewing and cleaning and, in the case of Wilma Flintstone, wearing stone-cut stilettos and brandishing a mini-mammoth vacuum cleaner: occupations that actually endorse not prehistoric but post-industrial norms of ‘feminine’ behaviour. The separation of the world of work into the superior productive and inferior reproductive, domestic sphere is not inherent to human organisation: it is a new thing. Over the course of centuries, the mechanisms of industrial capitalism and associated urbanisation have narrowed the concept of home to the confines of a house, creating in the process a system of battery pens for forced female labour. No wonder nobody wants to do the dishes any more.

Following the revolutionary feminism of the 1960s that began in the domestic prisons of the white middle-classes, the sheen has long since faded from the gilded cage of domesticity. Both men and women can now clearly see the trap into which ‘domestic’ labour

has been fashioned. But our response to this as decent, thinking beings has been woefully lacking. Feminism has achieved a vital expansion in women’s labour outside the home – but it has not won the corresponding, equally vital expansion of men’s labour within it. Feminism has amended the old patriarchal deal, but it has not ended it.

Mutually assured dysfunction

One of the most difficult things for feminists to acknowledge is the real harm done by women as well as by men in the domestic sphere. Partly as a consequence of hard-packed resentment at cultural isolation and forced drudgery, generations of women – mothers in particular – have handed down suffering, guilt and the expectation of patriarchal servitude to their children with a breathtaking ruthlessness borne of love and shame. Amanpreet Badyal, 21, told me how her childhood was blighted by her mother’s anguish:

My mother has tried repeatedly to break my spirit, claiming that she’s just preparing me for my mother-in-law. Alongside this, she harangued both my sisters to learn to cook; despite both successfully doing so, she subsequently tried to blame all marital problems, especially my eldest sister’s, on cooking. The thing is, my mum means well. She had seen what it is like for us Punjabi women, the sham of Sikh equality, and she wanted there to be no hope to so cruelly give way, treacherously feather-light, to betrayal and disappointment. I sincerely believed that I would never make it to 21, and that if I did, I would find myself in a marriage that would eventually drive me to suicide. How could I continue my mother’s cycle, and raise children that I resented? Why would I want to raise another child like myself, plagued by self-doubt and devoured by the family pack? I was hellishly afraid of this happening to me.

A blunt instrument for undermining gender activism and feminist solidarity is the claim that such assaults on human dignity are 'cultural', and therefore sacrosanct. In fact, not only is culture not a trump card in the progressive ideological battle, the isolation of women in the home and the traumatising of the domestic sphere are not unique to Sikh culture, or to 'Asian' culture, or to any culture not immediately comprehensible to middle-class white people. On the contrary, they are common throughout Western society, and have been a central narrative fact of the last 350 years of Western history.

Only saints react to imprisonment and abuse without retaliation, and women are not saints. The stereotype of the angel in the home was always a lie: for generations, and particularly since the post-war enforced domesticity of the 1950s, women have reacted to their domestic cages with a rage and resentment that has been at once effortlessly political and unguessably damaging. Given power in the domestic sphere and only there, limited, anxious matriarchies have developed across Western societies, and everyone understands what it means to have an Italian Mother, a Greek Mother, a Jewish Mother, or any other racist variation on the harridan hypothesis. The truth, however, is that the fury of female emotional control in the post-industrial home is the fury of the worker alienated from the means of production and reproduction, a fury deliberately weighted against the cruelty of male political and economic dominance in public society. Thus it is that 21st-century capitalism maintains a structure of gendered labour in which everyone, male or female, is to some extent powerless and to some extent miserable.

It is this dichotomy of dysfunction which is truly challenged by gay and single-parent families. When conservative pundits tell us that lone and homosexual parents represent a threat to 'family values', they are articulating this basic fear – that the structures of mutual repression will be broken by people brave enough to create and live in homes which challenge the culture and economics of that system.

I am the child and grandchild of housewives who hated housework. My grandmother, who as I write this chapter is in the latter stages of terminal cancer, did her duty as an immigrant Catholic homemaker, raising six children in a tiny council house in Bristol. A bright and beautiful woman who loved learning, Marta Penny ought to have gone to university, but her infant ambition was quickly crushed by the commandment to wield socio-economic power only and forever in the fantasy Catholic home. The frustrations of received femininity have defined my grandmother: her entire life has been undercut by misery, resentment and passive-aggression, instilled into her from her childhood in Malta, where her own mother made her scrub the floors daily with an old toothbrush to get her 'used' to drudgery.

Her youngest daughter, my mother, is a brilliant defence lawyer who put her career on hold to take care of my sisters and myself, having given up on getting my father to do his share. Raised with the belief that women deserved to be educated and to earn money, she was shocked to find herself facing the same frustrations that plagued her mother, frustrations which were lessened only after her divorce.

Beyond the gilded cage

In one way or another, the domestic deal makes cowards of us all. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* lit the fuse which blew the cage door open in the 1960s and 1970s, but we have failed, like tame animals, to step very far across the threshold of that cage. Our labour battles are tentative, and we are slow to apprehend our own bargaining power.

I asked hundreds of women, married and single, living with their partners and living with housemates, in Europe and North America and Australia, about how they organised their domestic labour and whether their partners shared the load. Hundreds of times over, the answer was almost identical: "He just can't cope with the dishes";

"He doesn't understand how to sort laundry no matter how many times I explain it"; "He says he can't do it, which is his way of saying that he won't do it". Most of all: "He says he can't see the dirt I see". One woman cried as she told me how she and her disabled mother had no choice but to cook, clean and care for a recalcitrant alcoholic father and two brothers, on top of being a single mother and student herself. "It actually is a war," she said.

Anyone who has ever been seven years old knows when "can't" really means "won't". What at first seemed to be individual grudges amongst the women and girls I interviewed turned out to be a universal complaint: even though they know perfectly well that there is no logical reason for them to be exempt from the sponge and the lloo brush, all that men and boys have to do to avoid chores is dig in their heels and refuse to acknowledge the dirt; sit and moulder in their own accumulating grime; wait out the filth. Eventually, a nearby female will reluctantly roll up her dainty sleeves and wipe up the mess.

It is not so much that men have a higher tolerance for dirt – on the contrary, recent studies have shown that roughly the same percentage of adult men and women care "a lot or quite a lot" about standards of hygiene and domestic comfort. Rather, domestic equality stumbles against the fact that men, as members of the domestic bourgeois, have so much more to lose as individuals and as a privileged group by facing up to the base cowardice of that 'can't'. What we are facing here is not series of separate household slanging matches but a systemic offensive against women's rights as workers.

My generation, born after the supposed victory of feminism, grew up with that labour dispute on our doorsteps, our infant identities held hostage in the subtle violence of domestic negotiations. Kathryn, 35, from Winnipeg, Canada, is just one of the growing army of women who will do anything, not to have to bear the pain and frustration that our mothers faced:

My mother seemed to be tired and stressed out pretty much all

the time. I don't remember her being happy often. I honestly think that by the end of the day, she had nothing left to give us, emotionally speaking – she was worn out, and even the fact that she was out there earning a paycheque had no appreciable impact on her total responsibility on the domestic front. Watching my mother become a tired automaton had a huge impact on my life. I vowed never to end up with a man who didn't do his share. I failed at that the first time, and I ended up hiring a cleaner to save my marriage. I couldn't stand that he wilfully ignored dirt, and I couldn't stand things only got done if I had a meltdown. I feel very strongly that my girls should see me smile and laugh as often as possible. I give them a lot of physical affection and tell them I love them every day, because I don't want them to feel the lack I did.

Big babies

There are, of course, some occasions when 'can't' really does mean 'can't'. And this should give us pause for thought. Why, in a culture which has had universal electrical provision for barely seventy years, do so many men lack the basic practical skills to prevent themselves and their loved ones starving, freezing, sickening, burning or choking to death in their own homes?

Like any bourgeois class, men have been kept ignorant and dependent on a class of labourers with subordinated bodies, and encouraged to see that ignorance and that dependence as empowerment. Boys in the post-war era in particular have been denied even the basic tools of housekeeping, and three generations of young men have now grown up watching their fathers do next to nothing in the home, apart from the sanctioned male activities of lawn maintenance and garden barbecue operation. Keeping men dependent on women to take care of them reinforces the double-headed axe of domestic disenfranchisement, ensuring that post-

industrial capitalist homemaking is seen as the only viable option for people who want to live comfortable lives and raise healthy families.

The genius of this strategy has been to persuade men that their learned incompetence in the home is strength, when in fact it is weakness – terrible weakness. That weakness places immeasurable restrictions on the choices of men and boys both within and outside the home.

The deliberate domestic disempowerment of men did not begin with no-fault divorce laws. On the contrary – the empowerment which men really have lost in the home is not about dominance, but about self-sufficiency: not a man's right to sit at the head of the table or to have 'access' to 'his' children, but the power to cook a meal that feeds a family or to keep himself and his loved ones from squalor and sickness. For many years, men and boys have been deliberately deprived of these skills, and adult men and women have colluded in that deprivation, which is two-horned in its faulty logic: not only are domestic work, childcare and homemaking beneath the dignity of men, but men themselves are apparently congenitally incapable of performing these tasks. How many times have you heard a home-based woman say, her resentment tinged with a hint of pride, that her husband just can't take care of himself – or, if he sometimes deigns to do the dishes, that he's 'well trained'? How many times have you heard a man refer to taking care of his own children as 'babysitting'?

Just as the lie of male domestic disempowerment flatters men that they are more suited to directly profit-producing work, it flatters women that housework is somehow their special inheritance, that their men are in some way genetically inferior, categorically incapable of taking proper care of themselves or anyone else.

Meanwhile, the most brain-bleedingly pointless domestic tasks have, for some young women today, become so alien and fantastic that they are now a lifestyle option. Cookery classes and knitting circles encourage young, trendy western women to indulge in

a sanctioned fantasy of glamorous domesticity that never really existed, an arched, kinky fetishism of the trappings of a drudgery that is still the reality of many women's lives. I know plenty of young women my age, educated and emancipated, who view the baking of immaculate muffins and the embroidering of intricate scarves and mittens as exciting hobbies, pastimes which should be properly performed in high-waisted fifties skirts and silly little pinafores. Oddly enough, most of these women have no more of a clue how to iron the pleats into a pair of dress trousers than I do. Such hedonistic time-wastage has all the historical accuracy of the sort of sexual role-play which involves Victorian schoolboy outfits and birch whipping canes, and like all such power-play, the practice is perfectly jolly fun as long as it isn't taken seriously. Unexamined, there is always the risk that a fetish will bleed into reality.

Working 9 to 5

In industrial capitalist society, waged work is the only strategy for being acknowledged and acknowledging yourself as fully human. As such, the struggles of women for equal pay and equal opportunities in the job market and the struggles of women to be recognised as human beings in their own right have been seen by many both within and outside the feminist movement as one and the same. In fact, they are nothing of the kind. Women are people whether we are waged or unwaged, working full time as business leaders or as mothers, whether we support ourselves financially, are supported by family members, or receive state benefits; all women are people, just as all people are people. Similarly, the right to equal pay for equal work, still a hurdle Western women have yet to surmount, is a struggle that is important on its own merits, because it is about basic fairness, not because waged work is what validates our very existence. We deserve equal pay because it is our right as workers: we do not require it to justify our humanity.

At some point during the 1990s, the international Wages For Housework campaign, once a key part of the feminist agenda, dragged itself into a corner and quietly died. The campaign, stolidly opposed even by right-thinking hand-wringing liberals in its day, is now universally acknowledged as preposterously unrealistic – not because it isn't women's moral right to receive rewards for their labour above and beyond the satisfaction of a job well done, but because no modern government can afford to pay its women for the lifetimes of work they do for free.

Passing the buck

Sadly, the trench warfare that currently has men terrified into refusing housework and women longing to rid themselves of it is pernicious enough that very many women would rather be complicit in the exploitation of other, poorer women than confront their own partners. The questions that Jane Story posed when writing for *New Internationalist* in 1988 are still hanging: "It appears that women professionals – feminist and non-feminist alike – have solved their personal housework crisis in the easiest way possible. They've simply bought their way out of the problem. Instead of being exploited themselves, they shift the exploitation to another woman. But not everyone can pass the buck in this way. Who cleans the cleaner's house?"²²

Of the women I spoke to who had found a workable solution to the sharing of domestic work in their households, 90% employed some sort of home help, from a weekly cleaner to a live-in au pair. Many more expressed a hope that they would one day be able to afford similar domestic help. Rich households have always had servants, but the anxiety and reach of contemporary Western women's employment of cleaners and carers to relieve them of the double shift of housework and paid work is unprecedented. This strategy is not without its drawbacks. Hardly any of the women

questioned were entirely comfortable with the situation, as well they might not be: nearly all cleaners, childminders and nannies are female, and a large proportion are foreign-born, either legal or illegal migrants. Western women's despair at the very point of asking our male relatives to do their bit, our unwillingness to challenge our system at its root, is such that an entire generation has been willing to simply hand down their oppression to poor, migrant and ethnic minority women.

Whilst most domestics are paid, albeit poorly, a proportion are illegal immigrants controlled by gangs, and some are victims of human trafficking. Although due to the nature of international operations accurate estimates are still impossible, it is believed that fully twelve percent of the 27 million victims of human trafficking worldwide – 700,000 in the United States alone – are indentured domestic slaves. A further 36% are delicately described as 'miscellaneous' or 'other' workers, meaning in plain English that some sex slaves are also expected to wash the sheets afterwards.

It would be soothing to think that the wealthy men and women employing these unfortunate women are largely ignorant of their plight, but this is not the case. In Westernised areas of the Middle East such as Dubai, the burning of domestics' passports is routine – and illegal residence in the country is punishable by death. In 2007, a wealthy couple from Mufftown, New York, were convicted of enslaving and torturing two Indonesian women who were brought to their mansion to work as housekeepers, and similar cases have come to light across the United States since federal anti-trafficking laws were brought into force in the year 2000. Across the world, disgusting damage is inflicted by our unwillingness to confront our terror of gender-specified drudgery.

Judith Ramirez, co-ordinator of the Toronto-based International Coalition to End Domestics' Exploitation (INTERCEDE) insists that there is no simple solution to what she calls "a modern day variation on the slave trade" – hiring a nanny or a housekeeper is

really a question of women trying to fend for themselves. "I don't see any other way when there are so few day-care places for young children. We're nowhere near a universal day-care system accessible to everyone. As long as that's the case, there are going to be a lot of women hired as domestics."

Men and women have been passing the buck for too long. We need to confront our own hypocrisy and find equitable, less exploitative solutions to the dichotomy of domestic dysfunction, before more harm is done.

Marginalised bodies, marginalised work

Every nation relies for its very survival on its female citizens failing, day after day, year after year, generation after generation, to refuse to drudge for no reward. This should, in theory, give women great power, simply by the threat of refusing, one day, to serve.

Female power of refusal is the single most scary, most horrifying, most insistently phobic thing facing any society, ever. Women could, in theory, refuse to cook and clean and care and keep society running. Women could refuse to fit themselves out in conformity with the patriarchal proclivity not just for staid, acceptable sex, but for social order. Women could refuse that vital work, the bearing of children and the raising of future generations, all of which are keyed in to the domestic gender war. Simply by doing nothing at all, women could bring every Western society to its knees tomorrow. That single fact is intolerably terrifying: women must be stopped at all costs from having that basic human right, the right to say no, the right to lay down our tools and pull on our skirts and say, stop. No more. I will not serve.

The very easiest way to deny someone the basic human right of refusal is to deny their personhood and potential. And the easiest way to deny someone their personhood and potential, in contemporary society as in any ancient slaveowning culture, is not

to pay them.

We could refuse to serve, of course. But anyone who has internalised even a solitary crumb of the post-industrial gender fetish knows that a woman's power of refusal is circumscribed on every level. In the flesh trade of modern production, women's labour hours, like our bodies, are common property. We all know that when a woman says no, she really means yes.

Conclusion

The neoliberal repugnance for women's bodies must be understood as a fundamental part of the strategies of work and capital that sustain global production. Individual women's anxiety about keeping our own bodies under control is part of the same structure of oppression under whose auspices cultural, physical and sexual violence is done to the bodies of low-status women, poor women, migrant workers, transsexual women, sex workers and every other person living and working at the coalface of the so-called gender war.

The recent revival in feminist sentiment across the West has so far failed to produce an adequate sense of political totality whereby a program for resistance to oppression might be developed. Such resistance is possible, but it will involve a sustained and serious attack on the social basis for control of women's bodies: on work, on domestic labour, on political power and intimacy. This is not a small task, nor one that can be accomplished purely on the basis of individual sexual and physical empowerment.

We cannot fuck our way to freedom. Sexuality alone, and heterosexuality in particular, is never enough to destabilise complex architectures of money and power. Without political agitation, sex can always be co-opted, calcifying gender revolution into another weary parade of saleable binary stereotypes.

We cannot shop our way to freedom. Even if we eventually manage to buy enough shoes, enough makeup and enough confidence-boosting surgical butchery to justify our place in the labour exchange of female beauty, we will find ourselves marginalised by the very process of physical transformation that promised to liberate us.

And we cannot fight the system on our own. Learning not to despise our own flesh is a political statement, and learning to eat and love and nurture ourselves a vital process for any woman wishing to engage positively with the world of power – but however hard

we try to love our bodies, it won't make us free. The personal is political, but as far as feminism is concerned, the political need not always collapse into the personal.

Popular culture's insistence on feminine erotic capital is a strategic part of the subsumption of women's labour, and the solution is collective as well as individual. For women, the personal is political precisely because our bodies are a collective site of material production; it follows that if we want to re-enfranchise ourselves, we must collectively refuse to submit to capitalist body orthodoxy. There is nothing more terrifying to a society built on female purchasing power and unpaid labour than the notion that women might refuse to join the sell. Patriarchal capitalism can put up with a great deal of women's chatter as long as we refrain from saying the one word nobody wants to hear from women: the word 'no'.

Contemporary pseudo-feminism is all about the power of yes. Yes, we want shoes, orgasms and menial office work. Yes, we want chocolate, snuggles and straight hair. Yes, we will do all the dirty little jobs nobody else wants to do, yes, we will mop and sweep and photocopy and do the shopping and plan the meals and organise the parties and wipe up all the shit and the dirt and grin and strip and perform and straighten our backs and smile and say yes, again yes, we will do it all. Yes, we will buy, more than anything we will buy what you tell us we need to buy to be acceptable. Yes, the word of submission, the word of coercion and capitulation. Yes, we will fuck you in gorgeous lingerie and yes, we will make you dinner afterwards. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes!

Body orthodoxy is the base code for this language of coercion, fooling women into the belief that by aligning ourselves within the narrow coffin of acceptable female physicality, by taming our bodies, purchasing the commoditised signs of western femininity and performing our sexuality in the most frigid and alienated of ways, we can lead happy, fulfilling lives. This is manifestly a lie. We can tell that this is a lie, because most women in the West are

still tired, unfulfilled and unhappy. However much we shop, screw, starve, sweat and apply make-up to conceal the marks of weariness and unhappiness, however perfectly we submit, the astronomically vast majority of women will never win within the rules of the system as it stands. The capitalist vision of female physical perfection is a shallow grave of frigid signs and brutal rules, signifying only sterility and death. If we want to live, we need to remember the language of resistance.

Only by remembering how to say 'no' will the women of the 21st century regain their voice and remember their power. 'No' is the most powerful word in a woman's dialectic arsenal, and it is the one word that our employers, our leaders and, quite often, the men in our lives would do anything to prevent us from saying. No, we will not serve. No, we will not settle for the dirty work, the low-paid work, the unpaid work. No, we will not stay late at the office, look after the kids, sort out the shopping. We refuse to fit the enormity of our passion, our creativity, and our potential into the rigid physical prison laid down for us since we were small children. No. We refuse. We will not buy your clothes and shoes and surgical solutions. No, we will not be beautiful; we will not be good. Most of all, we refuse to be beautiful and good.

If we want to be free, the women of the 21st century need to stop playing the game. We need to end our weary efforts to believe that our bodies are acceptable and begin to know, with a clear and brilliant certainty, that our persons are powerful.

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