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The Meanings and Experiences of Domestic Labour among Rural Women in Croatia

Abstract

Worldwide research has shown that women tend to devote a disproportionate amount of time to domestic labour that can be a barrier to gender equality and women's empowerment. The aim of this study is to investigate the extent to which women's role in unpaid domestic labour has an effect on their well-being and whether this presents a barrier to their empowerment or their ability 'to do and be' what they value. The study is based on ethnographic research in six rural villages located at the very north-eastern part of Croatia in Slavonia. This article draws on rural women's (and men's) accounts of their meanings and experiences in unpaid domestic labour. Pertaining to this labour, it also reviews their contribution as well as their lack of access to well-being in the family and wider community. Findings show that women's engagement in domestic labour has both positive and negative effects on their well-being, as well as that of their families and the wider community.

Keywords: domestic labour, well-being, women, rural, Croatia

Introduction

Paradoxically, although domestic labour is critical to the functioning and well-being of society, international scholars only first considered it as a fit subject for research in the mid 70s. Since then unpaid domestic labour has been conceptualised in many different ways and given diverse meanings and values in different socio-cultural contexts. Household tasks have been described as ungratifying, unfulfilling and unenjoyable; tasks that do not give one a chance to learn or develop as a person (Berk & Berk 1979). Housework has also been represented as isolating (Bernard 1972), routine, monotonous, menial, repetitive and mindless (Berheide 1984; Bernard 1972; Oakley 1974). On the

other hand, some researchers have shown that a high level of autonomy may be derived from unpaid domestic labour. A lack of supervision, being able to set their own schedules and organise their own work have been reported as the most valued aspects of housework (Bird & Ross 1993; Andre 1981; Berheide 1984; Ross & Wright 1998). Evidently, it is important to investigate all the different contexts in which domestic work is performed as well as the power-related issues of (in) equity, (in) justice and exploitation if we are to understand more completely the varied meanings it carries for the people who do it. This article uses a gender constructionist argument; doing housework and childcare (and being satisfied with this arrangement) is more an indication of what women and men '*should do*' than it is about their actual resources, possibilities, time availability and affinities (Oakley 1974; Berk 1985; West & Zimmerman 1987). Thus, decisions about who does what at home are not first and foremost determined by the needs of the household but rather reflect and reinforce the much broader organisation of society around assumptions of gender that affects well-being across individuals and social groups. In this article, unpaid domestic labour is recognised as work that not only produces goods and services but also reproduces gender relations (See Berk 1985; Fenstermaker, West & Zimmerman 1991; and Thompson & Walker 1989). In addition, it is perceived as a channel for creating and depleting well-being in the family that subsequently has an impact on the wider community.

Domestic Labour and Well-being

Regardless of its positive or negative features, domestic labour in all its forms is necessary for the well-being of individuals, families and communities universally. Since women continue to perform a disproportionate share of domestic work[1] that undeniably uses up all of their energy, the repercussions of this burden on their well-being cannot be ignored. Scholars have shown that women's increasing participation in unpaid domestic labour results in a state of 'lesser citizenship' or marginalisation such that they are more likely to live in poverty and have their own health compromised. (Angus 1994). Since

[1] This is one of the few social constants that hold across time, cultures, rural/urban spaces, as well as class/race/ethnicity differences. Time-use studies consistently show that women do most of the housework including childcare and eldercare (see Gershuny 2000; Eurostat 2003; EWCS 2005; OECD Family database 2010).

well-being is a multidimensional concept, several authors have moved beyond income, earnings and consumption and focus on additional dimensions of well-being that not only include health but education and capabilities (Nussbaum 2000; Narayan 2000; Sen 1985; 1987). For example, Narayan (2000) identifies material well-being, psychological well-being, body well-being, social well-being, freedom of choice and action, and security. The capability approach proposed by Sen[2] also expands the range of well-being dimensions by focusing on "states of being" more than on material attributes. The central tenet of this approach is that the appropriate "space" in which to conceptualise and measure well-being is not in terms of primary goods or utilities (whether in the form of either happiness or preferences) but rather in terms of a person's capabilities; that is, in the real freedoms that they have reason to value (1999: 74). In other words, the focus has moved from the standard of living to a wider concept of well-being concentrating on what people are free to do and be.

To reiterate, this study aims to investigate the extent to which women's roles in domestic labour has an effect on their well-being (in a wider sense given the multidimensionality of the concept). In other words, the extent to which this unpaid labour presents a barrier to their empowerment or their ability 'to do and be' what they value in rural villages in Slavonia, Croatia[3]. In addition, it will show how domestic labour is embedded in complex and shifting social processes relating to the construction of gender and well-being of families. Since these patterns can only be understood by addressing the symbolic significance of domestic labour, the social construction of gender in rural households will be considered as well as the social, cultural, economic and political contexts in which these women and men attribute meaning to their lives and sustain their families.

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[2] According to Sen the well-being of a person may plausibly be seen in terms of his/her functionings, which refers to the various things a person may succeed in "doing or being" (1999: 75) and capabilities that refer to his/her real or substantive freedom to achieve such functionings (1999: 73). Thus, functionings and capabilities can be seen as follows: being healthy/the ability to be healthy; participating in social or political events/the ability to participate in social or political events, etc. In short, the capability approach focuses on a person's real freedom or his/her *capability* to lead a life which s/he finds valuable. Since these freedoms or *capabilities* are also a reflection of a person's empowerment, they undoubtedly have a positive influence on his/her well-being.

[3] It should be noted that this study by no means represents the diversity of women in this region nor does it represent the scope of the meanings and experiences that they attribute to domestic labour.

Field Research

Fieldwork for this study was among both women and men in six rural villages in Slavonia, in the County of Vukovar-Sirmium, one of the 21 counties in the Republic of Croatia that was established in 1993, following Croatia's independence. The county is situated at the very north-east of Croatia. Research for this study involved structured questionnaires for demographic details and open in-depth interviews designed to explore a variety of gender issues (their family life, socialisation practices, personal life choices, perceptions of womanhood in rural spaces, ideal femininities, household division of labour, gender roles and expectations, education and work experiences, women's rights and aspirations, conflicts, etc.). Selected questionnaires followed by interviews were completed by 67 rural (farm) women (single, married and widowed mostly in their 30s and 40s) as well as some of their husbands (14) in their homes. Both women and men were asked to participate in this study to come to a closer understanding of the ways in which gender is constructed and the ways in which it is linked with levels of well-being experienced by both women and men. This research also included periods of fieldwork with village women and girls in less structured settings that facilitated an understanding of their experiences and lives, for example helping women with their household chores or preparation and participation in community events such as feasts, holy days and rites of passage.

Indicators of Traditionalism

Research results based on the demographic data of those who participated in this study indicated that traditional trends are at work in the rural villages of the County of Vukovar-Sirmium. Firstly, extended households are common in this sample and virilocal residences the norm. This is a consequence of inheritance and residence practices to date, whereby men usually inherit land and women customarily move to their husband's house upon marriage[4].

[4] These practices can be traced back to the *zadruga* (a large joint family or clan in which a group of patrilineally related males along with their spouses and children lived together) in which there was a strict gendered division of labour and hierarchical relations where women were often in a subordinate position. The *zadruga* persisted as a formally constituted kin group until well after WWI in Slavonia.

Under these circumstances, women are clearly disadvantaged because they often experience a rupture with their previous single life and are reduced to their reproductive biology whereby they have two crucial but limiting roles – effective housekeeping and bearing children (preferably sons)[5]. Their domestic position is weak and tension often develops within the triangular relation of mother, son and daughter-in-law. Daughters-in-law frequently experience a sense of marginalisation relative to their husband's family of origin in which it is assumed that they are responsible for all household and family labour. Secondly, their education levels are low and there was little aspiration or possibility among the women in this sample to pursue further education. Almost half of the women (43%) in the sample had only finished some grade of primary school, most commonly a lower grade while two had never attended school. Just over a third (38%) had only finished secondary school. Less than a fifth (16%) had completed some level of tertiary education. A low level of education[6] and lack of ambition especially among women in this region can explain why traditional gendered ideologies and practices have persistently survived and lasted (Šikić-Mićanović 2007)[7]. Without adequate education, rural women's opportunities for career advancement are limited. Formal education as a channel for social promotion could contribute to gender role change–affecting attitudes towards marriage, motherhood, division of labour and decision-making within the household. Predictably then, in view of their traditional upbringing and perspectives, levels of education, limited paid-work opportunities as well as the paucity of childcare provision in rural areas, more than three quarters of the women in this sample are not formally employed.

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[5] Ideally, all land is patrilineally transferred from father to son. Commonly all sons spend some time in their natal household upon marriage but the youngest son usually stays on indefinitely and is responsible for the welfare of his parents.

[6] The share of illiterate women amounts to 5.16% in this county (Census 2001).

[7] Needless to say, traditional domestic roles were (re) glorified for women throughout the country following transition and war to relieve the shock of all the transformations. As some scholars noted: 'Croatia became an independent nation state with a new political system in the midst of a war and economic crisis that undoubtedly strengthened existent patriarchal values in which women were being depoliticised, disciplined and domesticated' (Tomić-Koludrović & Kunac 1999: 96).

Unpaid and Domestic: Who does this work?

In accordance with gendered expectations and limited opportunities in these communities, women's work is more likely to be in the home. Research has long established that gendered divisions of labour in farm/rural households have cultural rather than biological foundations (Brandth 1995; Haugen 1998; Shortall 1992; van der Burg 1994; Whatmore 1994). Unquestionably, women in this study spend significantly more time on unpaid domestic labour than men; they undertake the bulk of housework duties, childcare and other 'invisible' tasks that are a crucial part of domestic work[8]. This social reproduction occurs mainly in the home and includes all the work that is required to provide for the health and well-being of families. Moreover, beyond providing for the family's physical maintenance, this work also supports the emotional and psychological well-being of both individuals and the family collectively. Women in this study do this 'homemaking' by e.g., managing mealtimes to suit all members, cooking food they like as well as managing interaction and relationship-building between family members to instil a feeling of affection, belongingness and harmony. Homemaking is particularly significant to many of the women who participated in this study, as this is a source of gratification, self-respect and dignity for them. Many women mentioned how proud they felt to be able to strengthen family relationships and contribute positively to their children's development. Further, they do not transfer parts of domestic labour they are responsible for to the market economy e.g., as a rule they do not buy ready-made food or hire commercial services for child care, cleaning, gardening and painting. However, they substantially contribute to the family's economic well-being by being thrifty in the home, making and repairing clothing as well as home décor, growing and preserving their own fruit and vegetables, which is all part of 'being a woman' and unpaid in these communities[9]. Adherence to these proper socially assigned roles, holds great power (although informal and less visible) and is another source of pride for women in these rural spaces.

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[8] Apart from their resourcefulness, women are expected to be versatile. They also need to know how to do men's work in their absence although men are not expected to do women's work.

[9] It should be noted that many women work in the informal economy (handiwork, selling produce at market, catering) to make ends meet which enables them to structure their day around the family's schedule.

In addition to doing more at home, they also feel responsible for family members' well-being and are more likely than men to adjust their work and home schedules to accommodate others. Further, this ethnographic study showed that the domestic work they do affords little freedom of choice (e.g., washing up, preparing dinner, bathing children, changing nappies) and cannot easily be postponed; it has to be done as the successful functioning of households depends on each task being performed efficiently. In comparison, domestic work for men (e.g., mowing the grass, outdoor and repair work) is high-control.[10] These types of tasks allow a good deal of choice and flexibility in terms of when and how they are performed. Moreover, the time most of these women spend in domestic labour varies throughout their life course, as they never retire. Correspondingly, they expand and contract their work schedules in compliance with their responsibility for others (i.e. care of their children, spouse, elderly and sick members of the family). In comparison, almost regardless of their position in the life course, men's weekly hours of domestic work tend to be minimal, fixed and are not regulated by immediacy or changes in the family's needs. As one woman with many years' experience explained:

> *Women don't have their own five minutes so they can't have a rest because so many things need to be done… they need to cook, wash, iron everything whereas men when they go to work – of course it's hard… but men finish their work before women do.* Ana, 72

Regardless of its low-control nature and considerable time consumption, most domestic labour is devalued and taken for granted since it takes place in the private sphere where it remains invisible. In the same way, as there is little separation for women between farm work and the home, women's contributions to farm work are also devalued.

In these rural spaces, it is socially unacceptable for men to do many forms of 'women's work', which makes women's lives harder according to most of the participants in this study. This is succinctly stated in the next excerpt from an employed widow with two children who was married for twenty years.

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[10] Similar gender role segregation has been found in other studies throughout Croatia (see Tomić-Koludrović & Kunac 2000 and Topolčić 2001)

> *I think it more difficult for women than for men because men always manage to find time for themselves. Some are more understanding now, they help their wives, but this is rare. My husband never wanted to do anything… that was considered normal – it all depends on the community and how they see this.* Manda, 39

As a result of these strict gender roles, domestic labour rarely disrupts men's careers but has unfavourable affects on the life paths of women. Some of the social disadvantages that flow from employed women's family responsibilities include: i) interrupted labour force attachment and downward social mobility; ii) lower lifetime earnings, less employment security; iii) increased exposure to the risk of poverty; iv) increased dependency on a male provider and low marital bargaining power; and v) restricted opportunities for public participation since family responsibilities are organised around family homes (see Bittman 1999). Since less than a quarter of the women in this sample are employed in the formal sector, the situation for the women is apparently worse. This is because access to paid employment (regardless of the social disadvantages mentioned above) provides ways of accessing welfare and social rights. Thus, many of these women inevitably face social exclusion from sources of information, relief and income as well as social networks since they are unemployed. Inevitably, this has a negative impact on well-being as is clearly reflected in the next quote from an unemployed woman.

> *You feel so poor and miserable. The main problem among women in the village is that they don't work and have allowed themselves to fall into a purposeless life. This is really no type of lifestyle.* Jasna, 32

Nonetheless, even though many of them do not earn money per se (as domestic work is unpaid), they are clearly making a vital contribution to the well-being of their own household through the provision of a wide range of different forms of care and support. As part of what women 'should do' in these communities, they unmistakably provide physical, emotional, psychological and economic well-being for their families through this work. However, this extensive domestic labour, in many ways, isolates and inhibits women, as it is often not an option or free choice where they receive little support. Further, the rural context must be taken into account. Not only are these women embedded in social processes that restrict opportunities for personal development and achievements as well as career advancement, they

also live in what could be called a "rural dull"[11] where there is a marked lack of cultural and leisure facilities for women. Thus, we need to ask whether they are prevented from "doing or being" (Sen 1999) i.e. are they unable to have real freedom or capability to lead lives which they find valuable because of these domestic responsibilities?

Ideals and Aspirations: What do they want to do and who do they want to be?

Researchers have claimed that in a patriarchal society 'work for a wage is less important to a woman's social identity than her domestic duties' (Massey, Hahn and Sekulić 1995: 360). Correspondingly, researchers have found that respondents raised in rural settings in Croatia tend to hold more negative attitudes towards women becoming involved in wage labour (Brajdić-Vuković, Birkelund and Štulhofer 2006). In another study, with 907 adults from rural villages throughout Croatia, Kodrnja (2002) found that most respondents (80.5%) accepted and affirmed patriarchal values. Some of the 'most acceptable' attitudes among participants of Kodrnja's study (2002: 166) include i) a well organised state should look after its members' needs like a father looks after members of his family; ii) if only one marital partner is employed this should naturally be the man and iii) most household duties are more appropriate for women. In a larger scale study involving 3,200 women in four counties of Croatia, Tomić-Koludrović and Kunac (2000) found that mothers are still the primary carers of children, especially when their children are sick (73% compared to 4% men). This research also showed that women readily accept their 'given' prescribed roles as housewives, housekeepers and guardians of the family. Consistently they found (regardless of urban or rural differences) that women most readily identify with and prefer the traditional woman's role of mother (93.4%) and wife (76%), while the role of the employed woman is in fifth place. Apparently women's choices are often already shaped by the belief that it is best for mothers to stay at home with their children, coupled with traditional divisions of labour in patriarchal, rural settings. Women in this study unanimously claimed that wage work/careers outside the home are not compatible with being a good mother, wife or homemaker. The conceptualisation of womanhood in these rural spaces is inextricably related

[11] See Haugen & Villa (2006)

to childcare and upbringing, domestic work and tending to the family's well-being. This is well illustrated in the next interview excerpts with unemployed mothers that responded to a question related to their conceptions of the ideal woman.

> *An 'ideal' woman is a good woman to her husband and children. I think that this is normal, this is not ideal… that she does the housekeeping. Her place is everywhere in society, at work, at home, everywhere… not only at home. But if she works, everything has to be done at home as well and the children are her responsibility.* Sanja, 39

> *One that is at home with her family… at home for every woman – there for her husband and children, but mostly for her children.* Dragica, 47

Undeniably, this can also be a source of stress if it disrupts or eliminates their leisure time or personal development, which is an important component of a person's well-being. Most women in this study claimed that they have little leisure time and that they rarely go away on holiday (due to financial reasons and farm obligations) such as this woman who is the mother of two children and lives in an extended farm household:

> *Our free time is on Sundays after 1 until 4 or when it is a holy day; we're not allowed to do needlework and it is then quite boring because we're used to working. I've tried to read but this doesn't work. I used to like to read but my mother always made me work. We visit our friends on Sundays and we go to the cemetery.* Ana, 45

Others said that they spend any available free time with their children[12] and they often emphasised their contribution to children's well-being. They claimed that mothers in rural areas have more time for their children, are more aware of their whereabouts and that they never 'leave them'. This is perceived by both women and men as one of the advantages of village life. All the women interviewed regard being a mother as a source of personal fulfilment and identity and none of them complained about the work children represent. Rather than being conceptualised as "more work and less leisure", women

[12] Although this is true considering their workloads, the contexts in which they live must also be taken into account. Few of these women drive and none of them walk around their villages unless there is a reason for doing so. Moreover, there is little to do in the village in the form of sport or recreation as soccer and cafes are not for married women.

in this study claimed that children can often provide women with economic and emotional security in the long-term. Namely, children are a reason for marriage (that corresponds to Catholic beliefs) as well as a guarantee that their marriages will stay intact because women can demand that their husbands fulfil their obligations as fathers. Sons allow women to gradually exercise control and influence as well as gain respect in the family and community. Especially later in life, children can contribute to women's well-being (for widows, in particular) by providing economic aid, company, social support and security. Hence, although their lives appear to be characterised by 'sacrifice with little leisure and fulfilment of personal goals' they are apparently rewarded later in life. Nevertheless, their choices are largely restricted by tradition, social norms and the needs of other members of the household and wider community.

In addition, there are invisible tasks such as kinwork[13] that are a way of sustaining family networks in Slavonia and like housework and childcare, are a woman's task. Based on fieldwork data, women often play an important role as the organisers of social interactions between families on feast days, religious holidays, rites of passage, etc. This important female role foregrounds the discursive position of women as responsible social beings and good 'communicators'. In particular, family and kinship played a crucial role in providing care for displaced persons and refugees[14] during the war period in Croatia. Since the County of Vukovar-Sirmium (including the villages included in this study) was heavily affected by war, destruction and high levels of displacement and exile, many families in this region not only provided refuge for their kin but also took in refugees from neighbouring Bosnia. While men were at the frontlines, women were responsible for the welfare of traumatised persons who were forced to leave their war-torn homes. Women in these communities have been pivotal in supporting their families and communities especially in times of need (i.e., during war, transition and the current recession).

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[13] Di Leonardo (1987: 442–443) defines kinwork as 'the conception, maintenance and ritual celebration of cross-household kin ties, including visits, letters, telephone calls, presents and cards to kin; the organisation of holiday gatherings; the creation and maintenance of quasi-kin relations; decisions to neglect or intensify particular ties; and the mental work of reflection about all these activities.

[14] Approximately 80% of all refugees lived in the families of relatives and friends, and only 20% were housed in state or other institutions, collective centres and camps (UNDP Human Development Report 1997).

Beyond doubt, regardless of circumstances, women can be seen as constituting part of the interconnecting "system" and the way households (mostly kin-related) are tied reciprocally to each other. However, kinwork can also be viewed from Bourdieu's perspective (Bourdieu, 2001: 105) as no more than an example of women functioning to produce and reproduce social capital, creating ties between men which serve men's interests as in status enhancement work (e.g., preparation of meals for husbands' relatives). While accusations that men benefit unfairly, without labouring, from women's kin and interactional work may be experientially true, the benefit may be only peripheral compared to women's 'benefits' and access to well-being. Consistently, many women in this study talked about their engagement in kinwork and many felt that this was a way of maintaining their sense of belonging first and foremost to their consanguineous family, as well as to friends and the local neighbourhood. This is important to them since most of them moved away from their natal households upon marriage. This rupture often meant that they became disconnected from their blood relatives so this work provides them with a capability, 'a real freedom' to lead lives, which they find valuable. Through this work, many women in this sample are proud to be agents of processes related to the preservation of a traditional rural life, strong family networks and a dedicated sense of community.

Additionally, many of the married women I spoke to have very concrete interests in preserving the image of a harmonious and stable family in which everyone gets along. They explained that this is very important to them because a woman in these spaces is perceived as primarily responsible for the home, family problems and children's upbringing. Although this important work is afforded little economic value, women often have to bear the emotional strain for the family. Moreover, particularly in rural communities, domestic space and the labour within these spaces are closely tied to a woman's identity. For instance, the ability to cook and the availability of home-made meals, that is, to provide 'proper' meals for their families, was viewed as vital by most women in this study: it was a fundamental part of women's roles as wives and mothers. They felt that the kitchen is their domain and like to be in control of it. The preparation and serving of food (as well as the growing and preservation of food) not only contributes to the well-being of the family but is closely related to femininity and the subjective experience of being a woman in these rural spaces. This is well-illustrated in the next quote from a woman who explains that roles remain highly gender specific and aptly sees how this can constrain women if they want to transgress these boundaries.

> *Women are still connected to a number of jobs and they simply can't devote enough time to themselves – that's the principle of existence in the village… this considerably constrains younger women in terms of how they see things and how they can make any changes. This is still felt among women -- that feeling of guilt if someone has a garden and you don't… 'you are less worthwhile, you are not a real woman!' This shouldn't be like this.* Jasna 41

On the other hand, doing femininity properly can reduce psychological stress among women since there is an enduring dominant belief that the 'ideal' woman is a good (*domaćica*) housewife and mother.[15] Her place is at home because if she is doing all of these things properly (tending to her children, husband and home) she has neither the time nor yearning to wander around. A good *'domaćica'* and mother is attentive to her family's well-being and acts as its moral guardian, teaching moral and spiritual values.[16] Unquestionably, this is one of the most effective and visible ways of 'doing gender', i.e., a way of doing 'respectable femininity' for these women as well as a way of accessing well-being. Considering women's crucial and central role within the household and family in these communities, one would then expect them to be able to exercise a certain degree of power and control to ensure their own well-being. However, as Yuval-Davis (1997: 68) has argued, women, children, the sick and the elderly can determine very little of their lives within the family domain, let alone outside it. Beyond doubt, women's lives in this study are often determined both by those who are more powerful within the family (especially if they reside with their in-laws and have little capital), and by outside ideologies and practices which are located wholly and partly within the civil society domain and/or state. Power is not only confined to face-to-face interactions associated with asymmetrical relationships involving the control of another's behaviour but can also be seen in the form of a more effective and insidious form of power that prevents conflicts arising in the first place. For example, in response to a question about who makes the important decisions in the family, a married couple in their mid-thirties responded in this way:

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[15] In comparison, according to the participants, an 'ideal' man is a man who provides the main source of income – who looks after his family.

[16] Women are principally responsible for bringing up their children in a religious way. It is their duty to encourage children to pray at home, say grace before meals, fast and abstain, go to mass on Sundays and Holy Days of Obligation, receive the sacraments, go to confession at least twice a year, etc.

Husband: *I do*
Wife: *my husband. I have learned that the husband needs to make decisions. That's what my mother did and that's how it was in the past. He doesn't do anything that is… we always come to some agreement. We mainly have the same ideas but I have learned that the husband should do this.*

In any case, the power that women have access to (if they conform to socially prescribed roles) is limited because it is less visible and informal as it has no relation to a 'legitimate authority'. Lack of control over the household budget, financial dependence and insecurity are also other factors that deplete well-being and accordingly do not give women the freedom to do what they value. In the next two excerpts, these two women express disappointment about not being able to do certain things (e.g. spend money freely without being criticised or wear make-up). They resentfully (yet without resilience) accept this because they know that this is the 'proper way for a wife to behave' in these rural communities.

I have always worked but I have never ruled the roost. I was never really persistent; he was always asked (for money)*; he always held the money… I never bought anything that was stupid or unnecessary but whenever I bought something -- he disapproved and sometimes he refused to give money to me. I wasn't free to buy what I wanted. I didn't make a fuss. I was angry but I didn't do anything.* Farm woman, 59

I never liked to do things that didn't suit my husband. I was always afraid of what people would say. I don't know maybe I was brought up this way. I always wanted to wear lipstick (the whole world does this) but he always objected, so that's why I gave up, we didn't fight about this; I just gave up. Farm woman, 60

Clearly, socialisation into traditional gendered roles combined with a certain lack of resilience or fear to transgress boundaries present an obstacle for these women, which undoubtedly has an impact on their well-being.

In addition, domestic labour is also subject to a strict measure of public control in these rural spaces, which usually means more work for women. Those women who do not keep up the standards of housekeeping (especially if this can be seen by others) are gossiped about in the community, which can also be detrimental to their well-being. Thus, performing burdensome amounts and an inequitable share of domestic labour are likely to reduce perceived control over one's life and, in turn, decrease well-being. Moreover, since this work is

so other-focussed this could also impact negatively on women's self-esteem and the concept of worth. However, as reported by the women in this study if this yields a clean and pleasant living environment (that is closely monitored by the community) and if this division is tied to the broader organisation of society around gender this may also be a source of well-being for them. Paradoxically, most seem untroubled and unconcerned by this 'unfairness'. I only came across one self-assured woman who spoke about this inequality and her struggle to change this traditional division of labour. Predictably, this farm woman is different in many ways. She has a tertiary education that she attained while living abroad. Rather than living with her in-laws, she lives in her parents' house (a rare example of uxorilocal residence) with her three children and younger husband.

> *It is difficult to get a man used to this. I had problems. For him, it was unthinkable that a man does this type of work but for me it was unthinkable that I had to do everything, clean after him… He would say: This should be done by a woman!* (Laughs) *This is a woman's job!* (Laughs again) *I had to fight… I had to fight… and I'm still fighting because he forgets quickly, but I'm persistent.* Vesna, 47

Clearly, in these villages, there is precise consensus about rules, roles and norms and both women and men stick to an allocation of responsibilities by 'blatant normalcy'. There does not seem to be uncertainty and unconcealed conflict about gender roles; at best, men are making selective choices such that change is confined to the more enjoyable or more highly valued activities. Some researchers have found that traditional wives and wives with traditional husbands are more inclined to avoid conflict when they experience discontent with the division of domestic labour compared to egalitarian wives or wives with egalitarian husbands (Kluwer, Heesink & Van de Vliert 1996). This lack of open conflict over domestic labour is also a way of 'doing gender' for women. Contesting traditional roles in these spaces is not appropriate for their gender or 'natural' so it is still difficult for women to complain and engage in conflict over the division of labour especially in extended households. Being a 'wife' in these rural villages demands a certain amount of submission and compliance with no claim to superiority or dominance over a husband or in-laws, which can be seen as a depletion of well-being. On the other hand, they can access well-being by affirming themselves as 'proper women' and reinforcing their position as 'good wives' and 'good mothers' in a farm/rural household to 'fit in', gain social power and appear in public without shame.

Concluding Remarks

In the rural communities where this study was conducted domestic labour is understood as exclusively women's work. Unfortunately, domestic work is not counted as real or vital for the economy in Croatia, even though it is just as important to the maintenance of society as the productive work that occurs in the formal market economy. This extra workload is in many ways a barrier to gender equality and women's empowerment because it is work that is carried out in the private sphere that only affords women limited power. Clearly, women play a dynamic role through their daily rehearsal of socially expected gender roles and relations in the production and reproduction of gender inequalities. In other words, gender inequalities are reflected in, and reinforced by women's participation in domestic labour that encapsulates a system of gender relations that silently disadvantages women in their access to power relations and makes women invisible because it effectively silences discussions and challenges to the status quo.

Conversely, doing this domestic work is also part of doing 'proper femininity,' in rural communities that has positive effects on women's well-being, as well as their families and the wider community. It includes all of the work that is required to provide for the physical, emotional and psychological well-being of families as well as wider communities. The homemaker role is viewed as a desirable role of moral superiority for women by both women and men in this study even though it is not rewarded financially. As part of the prevailing rural ideology that is strongly conservative a woman's place is ideally in the home attending to the needs of others. This is recognised as a component of women's marital and/or child-rearing roles and there is little questioning of women's subordination or lack of potential for personal development[17]. Satisfaction with doing all aspects of domestic labour reveals what women 'should do' – as a way to 'do gender' that produces proper gender relations. In other words, self-exploitation does or can produce satisfaction as it establishes that the women are confirming to social norms. They firmly hold onto these beliefs and practices because this means belonging to an old traditional rural culture in which they live. This sense of belonging is important to them since personal advancement and achievement have always been secondary and somewhat limited especially in the light of the current

[17] In comparison to contexts where gender inequalities are less pronounced where one would expect lower levels of contentment and well-being.

recession for women in these communities. By 'doing femininity' properly in unpaid domestic labour they reinforce and solidify bonds between family members and others in the wider community and possibly contribute to their own well-being by not being different. In other words, findings show that this ideological consignment to the private sphere does have positive effects for women. These include a distinct sense of pride (for their work is related to strengthening family relationships and networks, enhancing children's development, advocating a sense of community, etc.) as well as the private power although limited that is derived from this work.

Beyond doubt, the ways in which gender is articulated vary across different contexts and in some these "ways of doing and being" are more strictly bound by boundaries such as physical space, gender, age, religion, ethnicity, sexuality, etc. Evidently, results from this study show that women's choices are restricted by traditional social norms as well as by the needs of others, which almost certainly uses up all of their energies and must have an impact on their well-being. Inescapably, there are several disadvantages if women's energies are concentrated in unpaid work as this leads to financial dependence that may entail abuse and oppression, more poverty and an absence of pension benefits among women, as well as more involvement in the shadow economy that is often underpaid and insecure. With a lack of available educational opportunities (requalification), most of these women do not have the cultural capital necessary to overcome the obstacles of the competitive market economy. Moreover, the constraints and frustrations associated with domestic labour (worry, overload, lack of challenge, little control, fatigue and stress, feelings of inadequacy) in these rural communities must take a toll on women's lives especially if they have other work responsibilities. Moreover, their rural location (which can be read as isolation in some cases) undoubtedly entails some degree of social exclusion from different sources of information and networks that could improve their well-being. For example, their isolation may mean that they are at a greater risk of physical, emotional and sexual abuse. Likewise, since there is no anonymity and a high level of social control in these rural communities it may be difficult for defenceless women to access support (if available) in a safe and confidential way. A lack of time or freedom limits their ability to participate and benefit from developmental activity particularly at the non-familial, societal level. Thus, although women may be fully capable of resisting, they do remain constrained by an overarching social system such that scattered and uncollected resistances do not disrupt existing unequal gender roles and relations in these rural communities. Significantly,

a lack of women's public participation and other gender inequalities can lead to vulnerabilities and social exclusion that may have far-reaching implications for the overall development of rural areas.

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