

Depletion: Measuring the Costs of Social Reproduction

Public Lecture at the LSE, 6th February, 2012

Before I begin, I would like to thank the Gender Institute for inviting me to speak and also for hosting me as a Visiting Professor for the next three years. Colleagues at the Institute, in particular Anne Phillips, Sumi Madhok and Diane Perrons, have been part of my intellectual journey in different ways, so I was delighted to be given this honour.

I have been working on the issue of depletion now for the last three years – so it is relatively new and still developing work. What I present today is a collaborative piece of work– I have worked on this with my colleagues Catherine Hoskyns and Dania Thomas, neither of whom are able to be here today.

Feminists have long pointed to the unrecognised and unaccounted contribution of social reproductive work to national economies. What has been less studied is the consequence of this neglect for individuals, households and communities engaged in social reproduction. Where these consequences have been recognised, it has largely been in the context of economic crises. As Diane Elson has so pertinently pointed out in her analysis of gendered impact of crises, “If too much pressure is put upon the domestic sector to provide unpaid care work to make up for deficiencies elsewhere, the result may be a depletion of human capabilities, ... the domestic sector needs adequate inputs from all other sectors. It cannot be treated as a bottomless well, able to provide the care needed regardless of the resources it gets from the other sectors” (2000:28). In this work we take this insight and develop it in the context of the everyday political economy. We argue that the inflows into social reproduction outweigh the outflows generated by it. We term this difference depletion.

My motivation in working on this issue is also stems from another concern - regarding recognition and harm. Now, as you all know, the connection between non- or misrecognition and harm is not new. Nancy Fraser and Judith Butler have argued over the nature of capitalism, the injustices of distribution and injustices of recognition. Butler was insistent that Fraser’s perspectival dualism allowed issues of recognition to be trumped by those of economic distribution. While Fraser insisted that within her

framework, status-order injuries as well as maldistribution injuries often go together, the underlying message of her formulation was seen to be that the economic structure and the status order are not the same; that redistributive politics addresses the economic structure and the recognition politics addresses issues of identity, which are important but not reducible to the structure. The way that this debate informs my understanding of depletion is this: that depletion is a linking element between the sphere of economic distribution and the sphere of recognition. Without recognition of social reproductive work, we can also not recognise the extent and intensity of harm that is done through depletion in the doing of this work and can therefore not address how it might be accounted for and reversed.

So, my argument is that those engaged in social reproduction experience depletion (albeit at different rates and levels in different social contexts) when there is a critical gap between their outflows – domestic, affective and reproductive – and the inflows that sustain their health and well-being - both mental and physical. That this depletion affects the households and communities within which SR takes place. In the absence of recognition of the value of SR and its measurement, depletion is obscured and therefore cannot be systematically mapped or the issues addressed. This increases economic vulnerability and in times of crisis exacerbates the social costs of market failure. The mapping of depletion and research into reversing it is therefore urgent.

The literature and debates on social reproduction is both wide and sophisticated, and many in this room have contributed to these. But let me very briefly outline the concept of social reproduction as we use it in this work. We understand SR as comprising three elements –

1) biological reproduction (including reproducing labour). This carries with it the provision of the sexual, emotional and affective services that are required to maintain family and intimate relationships

2) unpaid production in the home of both goods and services. This includes different forms of care, as well as social provisioning and voluntary work directed at meeting needs in and of the community

3) reproduction of culture and ideology which stabilises (and sometimes challenges) dominant social relations (Hoskyns and Rai 2007:300).

Before going any further, it is perhaps important to acknowledge that scholars have worried about viewing domestic work through the dichotomized lens of work/non-work (Himmelweit, 1995). Some of their concerns have been about the commodification of domestic work and also about the overlooking of the rewards – affection, love, respect and joy – that this work can bring with it. Our purpose is not to disregard this concern. Rather, it is to understand how we might re-connect the spheres of SR and production in a nuanced feminist analysis with the recognition and measurement of depletion. Also, it is important to note that we all gain as well as lose in doing social reproductive work – satisfaction, love, gratitude, intimacy, all form part of the tapestry of social reproduction. However, our concern is the **sustainability over time** of this work and the well being of those engaged in it. Our approach, I would suggest, allows us to think of strategies needed to make those rewards available to ALL those who are engaged in SR – not just those who are able to buy in services of others in doing SR.

In order to present our argument I will do the following –

- 1) First, I will examine in more detail the implications of choosing depletion as the key concept and will define it.
- 2) I will then go on to identify the three main sites of depletion: the individual, the household and the community.
- 3) Following on from this, I will argue that depletion can be seen as a harm to individuals, families and communities, which needs to be measured and compensated for.
- 4) Finally, I will examine how depletion can and could be reversed through processes of mitigation, replenishment and transformation.

We can understand social reproduction as well as depletion only in the broader social context – of states and markets and the international political economy. In this diagram Catherine Hoskyns and I wanted to map out these intersecting fields of production and

reproduction, accumulation and redistribution and the consequences of unrecognised social reproduction as depletion.

We know from the work of feminist political economists that participants come to specific markets with unequal capabilities, bargaining capacities and resources (Sen, 1985a; Nussbaum, 2000). Class and gender are two axes of unequal power relations operating in the market. Both distort its benefits. For example, SR can be done by domestic workers in a care chain that is increasingly global. The extent of this poses serious challenges for those engaged in what is largely poorly paid work but which is nevertheless essential for their survival. They have to cope with the burden of work for wages as well as SR in their own homes (Razavi 2007; Safri and Graham 2010). Thus, for some the market can be beneficial as a space in which labour and wages are exchanged, but unless there is recognition of the costs of doing SR, or of the subsidy which this provides to the market, these benefits remain unequal.

Markets are shaped by state regulation and interventions. This becomes particularly visible during periods of economic crises. Examining the current economic crisis, Fraser has argued that social protection, in Polanyian terms, is being undermined within state policy structures and this in turn is affecting the boundaries of SR as well as the development of human capabilities (2011). One could argue that the restructuring of states and markets are leading to a situation where the subsidy provided by SR is being increasingly relied upon to fill the gaps in the state provision of welfare. In order to identify the extent to which this is harmful we need to measure the costs of SR, which we do through the concept of depletion. Market and the state are then critical concepts in understanding depletion.

So, what is depletion then? Depletion has been used largely in the context of environment in a specific sense - as reduction of quantity in a non-renewable resource or something that cannot be replaced. Environmental accounting addresses the differences between normal consumption of fixed capital (obsolescence, damage, wear and tear), depletion (extraction, or reducing the value of), and degradation (reducing the function of). We suggest that depletion best applies to SR. However, we use this concept rather differently, as follows:

Individuals, households and communities expend identifiable resources (R_t) in doing SR. At a particular point in time, we can arrive at the current stock of resources available in each of these sites by calculating *the difference between resource* outflows used up in the provision of SR and *the* resource inflows. Some examples of **inflows** are medical care, rest and leisure, income earned and time spent collectively, political participation and support networks and examples of **outflows** are, time spent on caring responsibilities, domestic chores, repairs and volunteerig. The difference between the two represents the net outflow of current stock. The resource stock is sensitive to the existing stock of resources and also to the outflows expended towards normal wear and tear. However, if after accounting for normal wear and tear the inflows that would otherwise replenish available stocks are reduced without a concomitant reduction in outflows used up in SR, there is a measurable deterioration in the sustainability of those engaged in SR. **More specifically, when resource stock deteriorates or falls below a threshold (TH) there is depletion of those engaged in SR which we refer to as DSR.** We then define DSR as -

$DSR = R_t < TH$, where R_t is the resource stock and TH is the threshold.

The tipping point or threshold at which DSR can be measured will vary individuals, households and communities. It is also important to note that the consequences of DSR are non-linear; DSR in one site can and does affect the resources in other sites. And that DSR involves paying attention to the intersectionalities of class, gender and culture in the doing of SR in the different sites. For example, what is 'normal' in terms of wear and tear in different socio-economic contexts? Do all units engaged in SR show the same wear and tear? How does this change over time and with access to different resources? In addition, we need to identify the inflows required to sustain individuals, households and communities and specify the co-relations between them. Finally, it is also important to note that DSR is not irreversible –it can be mitigated by interventions that boost input flows. And as I have already noted, states and markets play a critical role as they influence both resource inflows and outflows.

The way we have defined DSR then does not express the normal "wear and tear" of those engaged in work (paid as well as unpaid, doing productive and SR); rather it

points to the particular conditions of social unsustainability, rooted in the dominant modes of production of commodities and SR. We see DSR as referring to those structural aspects of SR that undermine the sustainability of the every-day lives of women and men in a given social context. Defining DSR in this way allows us to note the importance of the mis-recognition of SR in different sites. Measurement is an important form of recognition. Before discussing issues related to measurement, however, I will outline three sites in which SR takes place and therefore where DSR might be identified.

Sites of Depletion

The first site of DSR is the embodied *individual* engaged in SR embedded in household and community and enmeshed in social relations. These social relations are historically specific, culturally contested and affect the ways in which bodies are viewed, used/abused, work and are worked upon, depleted and renewed, consent and resist. In terms of resource inflows we need to measure health, well-being and self-hood to understand how DSR affects the individual body. The DSR of the individual can be physical – as measured by the Body Mass Index (BMI), tiredness, exhaustion, sleeplessness (or less sleep than needed for replenishment), health, clothing, heating, and access to clean water etc. It can also be mental – the undermining of the self, feelings of guilt and apprehension, and insufficient time for oneself, the enjoyment of the family and friendships, and to participate in community life. All these factors can, if they fall below the threshold of normal wear and tear, deteriorate the well-being outcomes, and reduce the capability of the individual to carry out SR in the long run. In certain circumstances they can even lead to increased morbidity.

The *household* is the second site of depletion that we identify. The definition of the household is contested and complex (Safa, 1999; Rawanpura, 2007). The UK Census defines household in the following way: “A household is one person living alone or a group of people – not necessarily related – living at the same address who share cooking facilities and also share a living room, sitting room or dining area” (2011). For our purposes here we define the household simply as a site where SR takes place. DSR of households then could include the decrease in collective household resources – leisure time spent together by members of the household as a result of extensions to the working day, failure to manage the consequences of an increase in the number of

household members engaged in wage labour and reduced support structures. It would also include the rate of repair of household infrastructure, including enough disposable income to carry out essential repairs to the fabric of the house, improving the environment of the house to support the members of the household, such as heating and water. So, DSR could be influenced by intangible factors such as the adverse affect of the standing of the household in the community. This might include the ability of the household to raise resources (inflows) – for childcare, funerals, decisions about schooling and training and for improving the life chances of members of the household. The household can benefit to different degrees from the resources of individuals that constitute it but can also exacerbate individual DSR. Our concern with the overlooked consequences of DSR thus blurs a clear demarcation between the public and private domains for the purposes of delineating areas of interventions by the state. We also argue that the extent and impact of DSR in individuals and households, is sensitive to and impacts DSR in communities, which is the third site of DSR that we identify.

Community is also a contested concept. As Fraser notes in another context, we need to “ask whether the community that is being disintegrated is worth preserving. This *moral* question deserves a central place in the critique of capitalist society (2011)”. Here, we rely on the concept of community developed by Iris Marion Young, as collectives of persons defined by ‘cultural forms, practices, or way of life...[and]are an expression of social relations... defined not primarily by a set of shared attributes, but by a sense of identity.’ The DSR of communities that we identify would include the shrinking of the Commons – of resources held and used in common, spaces for community mobilisation, the lack of time commitments from those mobilised into paid work and the depletion of community resources that comes with the non-use rather than the extensive or irresponsible use of community networks. The DSR of communities or a reduction in the resources required for social exchange can exacerbate the extent and effects of individual and household DSR. Similarly, the vibrancy of communities can mitigate the above.

Highlighting the household and the community as sites of DSR also makes clear the limitations of relying on individual consent as a norm that legitimates the non-recognition of SR, its costs (DSR) and the consequences of this for society.

I will now discuss **DSR as harm** and point to the urgency of reversing this harm.

As noted earlier, Fraser-Butler debate on capitalism, recognition/distribution and harm has informed this work on depletion. As have the legal debates on compensatory regimes for harm. While taking these insights into account, we argue that harm occurs when there is a measurable deterioration in the health and well-being of individuals and households and communities and when the inflows these require to sustain SR fall below a threshold of sustainability. In this context, despite consensual social relations, the doing of SR may still remain harmful. In our work, we discuss harm in the context of DSR in the following ways:

- 1) First, as 'discursive harm', that is negating work in the domestic sector, while through this negation affirming gendered social hierarchies and distinctions of class and race. The discourses of 'the housewife' and the 'working mother' are symbolic of the way this discursive harm operates in that they attach different social and even moral values to each which in turn impacts the distribution of resources and inflows.
- 2) Second, we can study harm as 'emotional harm', for example in the guilt associated with being a 'working mother' which condemns millions to believing they are harming their children's present and future (Harris, 2010). Further emotional harm is done to those who perform domestic labour, in that the tendency is to reproduce dependency and limit the capacities of the 'housewife' to act as agent in her own right.
- 3) Third, we can study harm as the (non)regulation of the working body within the home. This takes place through gendered regimes which allow multiple births and abortions, lack of sleep and leisure, and injuries during daily work which are often characterised as being the result of 'carelessness', and seen as episodic rather than as related to work. Regulatory regimes often refuse to acknowledge this harm, register it and address it – for example in the context of domestic violence.
- 4) Finally, we can examine the concept of harm as linked to the issues of access to formal modes of justice. Citizenship entitlements tend to follow the recognition of the contribution of individuals and groups to society. With the non-recognition

of SR and the DSR that accrues through it, we constitute groups as 'non-contributors' to the economy and therefore although the recipients of its welfare perhaps not entirely worthy of it (Morris, 2010).

Conceptualising DSR as harm is therefore an important device which helps to clarify issues of recognition, resource distribution and claim-making as well as to identify strategies for reversing its effects. The extent to which measurement or recognition is transformative of social roles and expectations or replenishing would depend on how social and political contexts influence resource inflows and outflows.

Feminists have been in the forefront of making the case for the UNSNA to take account through recognition and measurement of the contributions of SR to the economy and the wealth of nations as well as the costs that are incurred as a result (see Hoskyns and Rai, 2007). In a passionate attack on the continuing non-recognition/measurement of SR, Marilyn Waring warned: "When you are seeking out the most vicious tools of colonization, those that can obliterate a culture and a nation, a tribe or a people's value system, then rank the UNSNA [United Nation System of National Accounts] among those tools" (1988:49).

So, how might we measure DSR? There can be some difficulties in measuring DSR that we can outline straight away, such as:

- 1) The irregular and uneven nature of DSR;
- 2) The challenge of aggregating different forms of DSR at different levels and in different contexts.
- 3) The fact that the capacity to do SR involves renewable as well as finite resources complicates the criteria used to recognise and measure DSR.
- 4) The challenge of devising methodologies and units of measurement which are valid across the different sites of DSR as well as North/South boundaries.

However, the measurement of DSR is important for two reasons. First, theoretically DSR strengthens the case for recognising SR within the production boundary. Second, it also raises issues about adequate compensation for DSR.

In terms of developing measures for depletion at the three different levels that I have outlined, the work has not yet begun. However, we think that we can build on the work

done by environmental accountants and feminist economists (in the paper we outline this work in some detail) to measure the following: in measuring individual DSR the key variables might be: issues of mental and physical health, stress and stress related illness, anxiety, exhaustion, time spent on different forms of unpaid SR and time available for rest, leisure and maintaining the social networks that support individuals in their everyday lives.

For the household, the effects of DSR could be assessed by measuring its viability as a site of SR in the face of everyday economic and social pressures. This would include measuring: levels of income and its distribution, the changing patterns of labour and consumption, tasks performed including all forms of care, decision-making and the issues raised in intra-household bargaining.

In measuring DSR in communities, we would need to assess: the 'thickness' of social networks, the incentives and disincentives that people have to join these networks, the extent to which they are seen as strategies to mitigate individual and household DSR, their sustainability, and the interface of informal networks with formal institutionalised state structures, and the private sector. The nature and levels of voluntary work also need to be measured.

By measuring DSR in this way, we can demonstrate not only the value of SR but also of the costs of SR. We should be able to demonstrate the importance of adequate inflows into doing social reproductive work. Similarly, through measuring DSR we should be able to map the extent or intensiveness of the harm that DSR can do, if not addressed. This will allow us then to think through appropriate strategies for reversing this harm. Finally, measurement can help us demonstrate the structural biases of mis-recognition – for example, Stephanie Seguino has argued that contrary to assumptions, “gender wage inequality has stimulated growth, with Asian economies that disadvantaged women the most growing the fastest from 1975 to 1990...” Similarly, Repetto et al have pointed out that sustainable economic welfare has risen much more slowly than GNP. In Indonesia, for example, research showed that while GDP grew by 7.1% between 1972 and 1984, accounting for the loss of forestry, oil and soils meant that the estimate of environmentally adjusted NDP [National Development Plan] grew by only 4% in that period (cited in Hunt, 2006).

Up until now I have outlined the following issues related to DSR – its definition, the sites where it occurs, its measurement and the complexities related to measuring it. This discussion has also suggested that in the absence of reversal strategies the consequences of DSR are harmful and cumulative in that, depending on their class and gendered positioning, individuals, households and communities with high levels of DSR will be more harmed than others. I now outline three strategies to reverse DSR that we define as mitigation, replenishment and transformation.

Mitigation as a strategy for reversing DSR occurs when individuals attempt to lessen the consequences of DSR by, for example, paying for help or sharing tasks across genders. Adopting mitigating strategies would include paying others to do tasks such as childcare and cleaning, using labour saving appliances and buying convenience foods. Women with lower incomes and fewer resources are less able to use mitigating strategies which include cash payments but at all levels stress may be mitigated by communal and collective arrangements among networks of friends and neighbours. This whole area exposes differences in the effects of DSR not only between North and South but also between different classes, races and regions within particular national contexts. Inequality is thus built into mitigation and poses challenges as a result, although this remains the most directly available strategy to address DSR.

A second way of reversing DSR is what we call *replenishment*. This is where states or private bodies contribute to inflows, as Elson suggests, that go some way to lessen the effects of DSR without necessarily recognising it as harmful in the ways specified above. This would involve such state measures as tax breaks, state benefits and regulation of conditions of work, as well as availability of health care and free schooling (Elson, 2000). Replenishment would also include the work of voluntary associations and other non-state actors which assist households to cope with DSR but without addressing its structural causes. While obviously helpful in lessening DSR, these interventions are extremely variable and always in danger from cutbacks in times of economic crises and changing value systems. Struggles for consolidating and expanding social protection and community networks are important aspects of political action that must accompany this strategy to reverse DSR.

The third way to reverse DSR we term *transformation*, which involves structural change. There are two aspects to transformation in this context. The first is the restructuring of gendered social relations. This would mean, for example, both men and women being fully involved in the sharing of SR, and social provisions made to reflect this. This would transform not only the lives of millions of women who largely bear the burden of this work today but would also mean the restructuring of wider social relations, as gender based inequalities outside the home are challenged to equalise social reproductive work. The second aspect of transformation is the issue of the recognition and valuation of SR and therefore of DSR. The question here is whether capital can bear the costs of this valuation. If they are to be successful, both these transformative arenas need strategies that cut across private/public, North/South divides. Struggles for transforming both these arenas have been ongoing and have seen some successes – formal and informal, legal, constitutional and discursive – but as yet these successes have not led to systemic transformations. However, if we see successful transformation not as a single revolutionary event but as a bundle of changes that may add up to transformation in the long term, then we may see some elements of that bundle emerging through these struggles for gender equality and the valuation of SR.

These strategies are of course not fixed and the boundaries between them remain fluid. We separate them out here only as a heuristic device. In some ways mitigation and replenishment, while hugely important in themselves, could be seen to take the edge off the crisis of DSR – transformation remains far from realisable at the moment.

So, in conclusion, I have argued that without recognising and measuring the costs of DSR we cannot address the growing pressures on those involved in SR on an everyday basis. These costs are harmful in different sites in different ways. These costs are not linear but are produced in complex circumstances and therefore pose a challenge in terms of their measurement as well as their reversal. While the former is still far from being realised, there are some indications of shifts in compensatory regimes, especially at the individual level. In this paper we have argued that the capitalist system depends on the subsidy that SR provides. We have also argued that this subsidy, when not acknowledged leads to harm – both status based gendered harm and harm because of maldistribution (dependence, violence etc.). We have theorised this harm as DSR, which

is a component of the subsidy that SR provides capital. So, in this context, we are suggesting that the 'merely cultural' in terms of the recognition of unequal gendered relations is central to the reproduction of the capitalist system. The non-recognition of these inequalities is injurious to those engaged in social reproductive work. Now, it could be that social reproductive work is done by both men and women, in hetero- or homosexual relations. If this were the case then the question of subsidy that this work provides would be perhaps less sensitive to issues of recognition, but the question of redistribution would remain salient. That despite the existence of a huge amount of research, lobbying and campaigns social reproductive work remains outside the 'production boundary' might have theoretically nothing to do with the fact that this work is done by women but when we put this in the context of wider gendered inequalities, the gender segregation of work and the empirical evidence of women's concentration in this work arena, then the issue of recognition of social reproduction does not seem unrelated to gender hierarchies. Transformation of gender hierarchies then is critical to reversing the negation of social reproductive work. This position is different from Fraser's who argues that "a status injury [such as that suffered by lesbians and gays in a homophobic world] is analytically distinct from, and conceptually irreducible to, the injustice of maldistribution, although it *may* be accompanied by the latter" (1997: 141). It is also different from her position that we can identify which primary harm is suffered in different situations – whether it is economic or status-order harm, which will determine the route to transformation of the situation.

In relation to Butler's argument regarding the cultural and the economic our argument is also different. We have shown how it is the nature of work that is providing the subsidy to capital rather than those who do this work. We have consistently used the term social reproduction rather than women's work. The point here is that if, through struggles for justice to address gender equality, there is a shift in the nature of those doing social reproductive work, that is, if there is gender parity in delivering social reproduction, the subsidy to capital would still continue and could cause harm to those involved in its provision, if not adequately compensated. In that context, the politics of recognition does not lead seamlessly to the politics of redistribution. It is theoretically possible that men and women participate in social reproduction equally without bringing this work within the production boundary. Our approach has therefore made a

distinction between mitigatory (individual), replenishing (state/private) and transformative strategies to address DSR. By making this distinction we suggest that while the structural barriers to including social reproductive work within the production boundary continue to exist, we need to be vigilant in the context of the crisis of capitalism that addressing DSR does not lead to the privatising of risk, with mitigatory strategies at one end leading to the increase in DSR down the care chain. Our research on DSR shows that the maintenance and extension of social protection that the state provides (replenishment strategy in our schema) is important to struggle for; the defence of social protection then becomes an urgent task in times of crisis¹. Delivering justice then, remains tied to both – the transformation of gendered social relations and to addressing maldistribution of resources in capitalist regimes of accumulation, production and exchange. The recognition, measurement and compensation of SR and DSR then remain a critical issues for gender equality.

Thank you.

¹ This is not to overlook the dilemmas of social protectionism; as Fraser has argued,