

Irena Egle Laumenskaite

THE UNIQUENESS OF THE WORK OF THE WOMAN IN THE SOCIETY FOR ITS HUMANIZATION

As it said in Preparatory Catecheses for this – the Seventh – World Meeting of Families, “The *woman’s irreplaceable contribution* to the family’s formation and the development of society is still awaiting due recognition and appropriate evaluation”. The uniqueness of the work of the woman is related with her dignity and mission, but the question of the uniqueness of her work is not easy one, because the work even more than family is seen as a common destiny and possibility to human realization for both man and woman or is considered mainly differentiated into masculine and feminine roles, what confronts with the ontological dimension of human sexuality.¹

More easy is to speak about the importance of work of the woman and her contribution to the life of society what is mainly discussed from sociological, psychological, economical perspectives with using the imperative of gender equality. These ways of analysis give relevant material to disclose some aspects of the problem and the tasks in order to expand women possibilities in social life, their valuable input and personal realization. I hope my colleagues for Pavia University will give important insights for that. But I think that the question of woman’s work, which mainly manifests and is discussed on these mentioned above levels of human and social reality, has deeper roots and due to that has to be also reflected on more profound base – from the anthropological point of view, because the uniqueness of the persons as well as their gifts and their possible contributions could be seen mainly from this perspective. Because the form the society develops depends on the understanding of the human person.

But as to disclose the necessity of the anthropological perspective I will begin with the analysis of the predominant experience of the work and the specific of women work in the context of all contemporary human life, avoiding any predominant orientation to make decisions merely on the level of social structures.

Hanna Arendt in her reflection what does it mean to be human in the sphere of *vita active* distinguished three stages of activity and corresponding levels of humanity: labor, work, action². In her analysis labor seems to be almost pre-human activity, because it consists of perpetual practices necessary mainly for the maintenance of survival. It is the sphere of necessity. In labor market one deals with individuals for whom a job is primarily a means to earn enough income to live and support a family. This primal aim is clear in poor societies with the predominant physical labor, but now in the West with its technological and economic development it could be questioned. Here this concept was grounded in the beginning of capitalist production, when – in Marx’s sense – a proletarian is one who lives by selling his labor.

When we see the work as the labor we are looking mainly for bigger salary in order to have better life with possibilities to engage in hobbies, give education to children, have a better house etc. In such a case the job provides structure, but not necessary meaning. Only still for few the job is intimately tied up with personal identity and is major source of life’s meaning but mainly for individual success, recognition and status, not seeing this as a way of collaboration for living in community for a common good. In this sense, as said Nicholas Boyle, “we

¹ See: Scola A., “Dignity and Mission of Women: the Anthropological and Theological Foundations” / *Communio* 25 (Spring 1998), pp. 42-56.

² Arendt H., *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), pp. 7-9.

are all proletarians now, down to the last yuppie”³. Economics sees no value in an individual’s development towards a goal other than exchange, or in any form of "enrichment" of society which has a truly communal (as opposed to an aggregative) dimension or is measurable in terms other than those of "production". It continues to believe in the eighteenth-century assumptions that the expansion of wealth will suffice for individuals to become sufficiently employed and civilized so as to live together⁴.

Woman, family life and labor market

How this influenced a family life and especially a woman’s work?

In traditional society the sphere of work and the family life were commonly not separated in space. Male and female activities more often than not were operated side-by-side. So the children could know and respectively take over both male and female roles, but above all – the patterns of their interaction and cooperation. Being not involved in public activities, but taking care of transmitting human values, which in everyday life took the form of simple duties and giving children basic education, woman usually were more attentive with regard to human morals and could help in making the right decisions.

With the beginning of industrialization first and foremost the sphere of work as a public activity and the family life are separated in space. The father was expelled from the daily round, as he returned back late from his work at the factory or in the office. Therefore children manage to relate his responsibilities mainly with earning money. Thus the modern family diminishing the role of the man as a father devolved the responsibility for children’s education and socialization mainly upon the mother, and today, when a woman in turn also leaves the family to work in the public sphere – mainly upon the system of education and "parent free home".

What impelled women to leave the family for the labor market? The priorities of women were changed not only due to increased and progressively boosted family tangible needs. A more important factor was the devaluation of activity and communication in the family, because the paid work and its results, which earlier were more related with male action, became less often a simple economic fact than a complex cultural value. Consequently a woman, seeking to be of equal dignity and worth, more and more often abandons family life and with entering the contractual public activities absorbs the prevailing pattern of "the imperialism of the model of economic man" or "masculine domination": functional relations, expansiveness, competition, and even the pursuit of power and fame – all what we name as capacity to hold life in one’s hands. Women work alongside men all day long for contribution to the economic maintenance of the family and return each night to what sociologist Arlie Hochschild labeled a "second shift"⁵ in the home to take various domestic and childcare responsibilities.

This reality of women's social enfranchisement encouraged a second vision of emancipated womanhood: the Superwoman who could perform highly in a career as well as being a wonderful mother. Super or not, most women who are mothers today are faced with this challenge of performing what were considered a generation ago two full-time jobs in the space of each day. And to intensify the challenge, as corporate down-sizing has occurred, working hours on the first shift have increased for everyone. ⁶ For a great proportion of women and men, as well, it seems that there are not enough hours in the day to satisfactorily fulfill both workplace and familial obligations because of "the time bind."

³ Boyle N., *Who Are We Now? Christian Humanism and the Global Market from Hegel to Heaney*. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998), p. 26.

⁴ Meda D., "New Perspectives on Work as Value". / *International Labour Review* , vol. 135 (1996), no. 6 .

⁵ Hochschild, A., *The Second Shift* (New York: Avon, 1989).

⁶ See: Hochschild, A., *The Time Bind: When Work Becomes Home and Home Becomes Work* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1997), pp. 6, 268-9.

Many second-wave feminists hoped that the empowerment of women would involve a society-wide change in values with a general shift towards valuing personal and familial relations more highly, and a pulling back from competitive, contractual public activities. Quite the opposite trend has been developing. Arlie Hochschild demonstrates that women have begun to take flight from the family and the mother/child paradigm just as men always have embracing the contractual system of work whole-heartedly. Not only that, after bearing children, these mothers are contracting with other women to care for their children while they spend ever-longer days in the public workplace. This is typical to many mothers in Lithuania, where both parents are taking more than one job to meet the material needs of family members. Such mothers are not only acceding to the competitive values of the labor market in remaking their own work lives, but they are allowing the contractual system to penetrate into the very heart of their family lives.⁷

In a sense, the contractual system is challenged to prove its ability to take on a whole new range of personal relationships. Surely there are many aspects of women's traditional role that can legitimately be contracted out: housecleaning, cooking, laundry, some childcare time. But what was the relationship between such caretaking tasks and the affective mother/child relationship? If we could learn to distinguish between the significant and not so significant aspects of a woman's traditional role, we might be capable of specifying the elements of the mother/child paradigm that should be generalized to other relationships.

But with the shift to contractual paradigm – with manageable assignments and a sense of competence in the workplace, parents felt themselves subject to relentless and uncontrollable demands in the home. They not demanded shorter working hours, and so are in a sense complicit in their own time binds.

In addition, Arlie Hochschild found third factor motivating women to spend longer hours in the workplace. At all levels of the job hierarchy, she found women concerned with issues of gender equality, using the workplace to engage in struggles for greater amounts of recognition, both from co-workers and from domestic partners.

A second strategy for dealing with a time bind in the home is to contract with others to perform one's familial obligations. Women are becoming masters of "outsourcing," buying goods and services that free them from their traditional duties as wives and mothers. We now take for granted many substitutes for the interpersonal labor of women within families: from childcare and domestic help to summer camps and retirement homes, from pre-cooked meals to psychotherapy, we have outsourced many traditional interpersonal obligations of wives and mothers. The commodification of home life is expanding rapidly.

How has this situation come about? To answer this question we must recognize that personal relationships have been embedded within a largely involuntary and not yet reflected structure of male and female roles within our society that essentially are functional. With the social enfranchisement of women, a woman's decision to become a wife or mother is newly voluntary, as is a man's decision to become a husband or father. For the first time, a woman's workplace role is in direct competition with her familial role. Insofar as men are beginning to share familial roles, this competition affects them as well.

With the social enfranchisement of women, familial and intangible relations were quite readily translated into tangible contractual terms. Arlie Hochschild points out that mothers as well as fathers now evaluate their relations with their children in terms of how well the child is performing or "turning out." The child, along with other tasks in the taylorized home, has been turned into a product. Parents accept an explicitly goal-oriented relationship

⁷ Here and further this sociological analysis I ground on Patricia Mann's and Arlie Hochschild's insights. See also: Hochschild, A. "Rent a mom" and other services: markets, meanings and emotions' / *Int. J. Work Organisation and Emotion*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp.74–86; Mann P.S., *Towards a Post-patriarchal Family*. / Paper given at the Twentieth World Congress of Philosophy, in Boston, Massachusetts from August 10-15, 1998.

with the child, outsourcing the most tangible personal needs, as they do their own. There is simply no currency for measuring many intangible personal needs previously addressed by the involuntary if loving interpersonal labor of women, so these are ignored or devalued.

Despite the fact that a work-family imbalance is experienced as a lack of time for family relations, I suspect that a work-family balance would not be achieved through any simple redistribution of time between workplace and home. We have to leave the centeredness around the work as labor and to articulate not only the different quality of life in a familial context of love and care, as well as its intrinsic value, but also a possible different attitude to work, not reducing it to contractual job as labor. For that let us look how the commercialization of family life and even the familiar relations is bound with labor experience.

In technological culture individuals are prepared to be enframed by the demands of efficiency. The centrality of work as labor to the transmission of technological culture has extended to the sphere of *consumption*. The characteristic *experience* associated with the purposive orientation of this modern work is for the body to be related to as an *object*. Human activity which is more than production now is reduced to instrumental action. In this way a culture – the development of human capacities with all the suffering, creation, and joy that entails – is confused with labor and consumption alone. In production, work in the form of waged-labor continues to provide the means through which people acquire the skills and dispositions that discipline and mould their bodies to the performative demands of their role. ‘Flexibility’ has become a byword not only for manufacturers, consultants and computer specialists being able to produce what customers want, when they want it, but also for embodied subjects who are prepared to manage themselves in a manner which involves their bodies ‘standing ready’ to be called upon for the purposes of efficient performance⁸. This may increase the productive capacity of technological culture, but has major consequences for the embodied person. The major criticism levied against this ‘heroic’ view of personality involves its masculinist connotations and its neglect of human interdependence and ‘subsidiary awareness’ of the body.

Women’s work

I still said nothing about the uniqueness of work of woman simply to show that there is almost any space for that in her predominant labor experience and superwoman’s role. Nevertheless the use of women’s interpersonal skills for “trust and team-building” in the business with giving them a responsibility to evaluate employee’s soft skills points to their possible unique input. Meanwhile it is enacted in order to achieve mainly instrumental gains with providing a more humane work environment. But this indicates the potential value of other specific women’s work as well. I mean her care work, community work and volunteering as types of work that primarily is not functional but interpersonal and intangible. I mean a work, because it differently from labor, as Arendt says, results in founding relatively stable and independent human realm of common things and due to that opens to a relational paradigm. Paid job accounts for the financial value of women’s work but leaves out diversity of work and suggests a very narrow purpose of it. The informal economy begins to account for more diverse types of women’s work and broader purposes, but it is often invisible.

Because caring labor is performed by paid and unpaid careers in households and community, it is necessary to make a distinction between caring *for* and caring *about*.⁹ Caring *for* speaks to physical and concrete activities including feeding, cleaning, and attending to needs of others, while caring *about* captures the relational and emotional work. The importance of this distinction lies in the challenge it raises for assumptions that equate the expectation that women will care for others if they care about them because it is caring relations rather than what persons do as individuals that exemplify the values of caring. Those defending an ethic of care have successively

⁸ Shilling, C., *The Body in Culture, Technology & Society* (London: Sage, 2005), pp. 73-100.

⁹ Neysmith Sh., Reitsma-Street M., Baker Collins S., Porte E., “Provisioning: Thinking About All of Women’s Work” / *Canadian Woman Studies*, Vol 23 (3,4). P. 192-198.

shown why it should be seen applicable to political and social life, and not limited to the “private” sphere. An ethic of care provides the grounds for arguing that we should care about one another as fellow members of communities, including gradually of the global community on which the future health of mutual environments and relations depends.¹⁰

This asks time now measured in money and because of that the necessary to question the idea that adherence to clock time is an indicator of progress while other concepts of time are remnants of old cultural practices. Volunteering is considered an important avenue for making a contribution to one’s community. But the lack of acknowledgment and statistics makes that many women would fall into that category of not doing volunteer work and, by default, not contributing to community well-being. Thus once again a concept and the tools used to operationalize it fail to capture an important dimension of women’s lives.

Therefore this speaks about the necessity for the third stage of human activity – a social action, because to act is to begin something, to initiate, to set in for human and therefore social motion. But in this case it is not for feminism oriented towards “the wages for housework” and equal participating in labor market. We need to re-think the basis for familial and personal relations, as well as the basis for human work which is essentially relational. The challenge will be to illuminate the intrinsic value of personal relations that are voluntary but explicitly non-contractual in their configuration.

The present crisis of family and work relations is already the anthropological crisis – it is at the deepest level of human reality and consequently accumulates both sociological and psychological levels.

The uniqueness of the woman’s contribution for humanization of the society

For centuries through her daily work at home a woman expressed its relational dimension – working voluntary for the good of her family members with the gift of self and of that acceptance of others. But this was not reflected because was seen mainly through functional lenses on woman’s work. This attitude grounded on the long-lasting essentialist concept of sexual differences was later challenged with socially constructed concept of gender based on different and changing cultural norms with orientation to emancipate a woman as an individual from social inequality using the principal of deconstruction. With the orientation only to woman’s social roles she is confronted with the man who exercised socially more valued functions.

But to see sexes in one or another relation is not the same as to see the sexual differences as a relational reality. The persons – man or woman – are the unique and relational beings, whose equal dignity and difference open them in their mutual relationship to authentic *communio personarum*. But it is necessary to highlight that this given nature of *Imago Dei* is nature as it is lived. Every human being (man and woman) becomes fully himself to the extent that he gives himself as a free gift to others.¹¹ Hence we become who we are by the exercise of our freedom and thus by our own actions.

The gift and reciprocity are the dimensions of social relations that manifest foremost in the family ought to be the concurrent reality of other relations as well.¹² This capacity for a gift in the sphere of work could be strengthened by discovering its value and necessity to overcome a functional attitude in human relations – to sustain the subjective dimension of work and to invite man and woman for complementary collaboration.

¹⁰ See: Held V., “Care and the Extension of Markets” / *Hypatia*, vol. 17, No. 2 (Spring 2002), pp. 19-33; Held V., “Care and Justice in the Global Context” / *Ratio Juris*. Vol. 17 No. 2 June 2004, pp. 141–155.

¹¹ John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*. (N.Y.:Knoph, 1994) p. 209.

¹² Donati, P., “Relazione familiare: la prospettiva sociologica” / Scabini E., Rossi G. (cur.), *Le parole della famiglia* (Vita e pensiero, 2006), p. 58.

For many years the Church in her Social Teaching defended mainly the rights of workers to be paid a wage that allows them to support themselves and the family, and to fulfill their family obligations in a worthy manner.¹³ A deepening concern for other dimensions of work manifested appeared since the Vatican Council II. The understanding that the dignity of work stems from its subjective dimension emerged due to the reflections on the anthropological question. Since the key to solution of the social question is the unconditional primacy of the human person, the human work, as the pope John Paul II put stress on, acquires fundamental and decisive importance.¹⁴ If each sort of work must be judged above all by the measure of the dignity of the subject of work, that is to say the person who carries it out¹⁵, the woman due to her profound maternity is this first who bear witness to the meaning of the gift of self and of that acceptance of others¹⁶.

Women first learn and then teach others that human relations are authentic if they are open to accepting the other person: a person who is recognized and loved because of the dignity which comes from being a person and not from other considerations, such as usefulness, strength, intelligence, beauty or health. This is the fundamental contribution which the Church and humanity expect from women. And it is the indispensable prerequisite for an authentic cultural change,¹⁷ says John Paul II.

The Church's hope for the true genius of woman, expressed by John Paul II in *Evangelium Vitae* gradually manifests in developing of relational approach in human activity (in social work, management, community development). A solid example in the sphere of economics would be the initiative of Chiara Lubich, the founder of the Focolare Movement, with the Economy of Communion. This brought to life not only more than 700 enterprises of a new type but also the foreseeing in the principle of "communion" a contribution leading beyond the individualistic paradigm underlying the prevailing economic theories, because recognizes the importance of personal relations. This new project is grounded on profound awareness of the fact that the gift of self is the most precious of all. Giving need not be confined to material or quantifiable items, rather understanding, attention, forgiveness, time, talents, ideas, and help are also gifts to share. This theory of giving resonates well with the culture of communion which rests on the premise that everyone has something to give.¹⁸

If the person comes to self-realization only in relation to the other – if man and woman identify who they really are thanks to the other – woman's vocation and social identity can be defined in coherence with man's vocation and identity. The reverse can also be true. Their interdependence (being different and ipso facto complementary) means that the most important decisions on life and activity for that have to be taken together. Namely the solidarity of the two – as two different but complementary persons acting together for the survival and consolidation of the family in their integral complementarity¹⁹, which is creative and vital, as well as in every other sphere of social life – has to be more fruitful than efforts just of women organizations. On the primacy of men and women working alongside each other in the hierarchy of social interaction Gertrude von Le Fort writes: "Every sort of co-operation, even the most insignificant, between man and woman is, in its bearing upon the wholeness of life, of far greater import than associations that are purely masculine or purely feminine. Naturally, such associations have their definite purposes inasmuch as they are dedicated to a common struggle or ideal and

¹³ Leo XII, *Rerum Novarum*, (1891),46; John XXIII, Encyclical "Mater et Magistra" (1961), 71.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Laborem Exercens* (1981), 3,6.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Evangelium Vitae* (1995), 99.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ See: Bruni L., Uelmen C., "Religious values and corporate decision making: the economy of communion project" / *Fordham journal of corporate & financial law*, vol. XI, 2006, pp. 645-680; Official website of Economy of Communion <http://www.edc-online.org/en.html>

¹⁹ Allen, P., *Man-Woman Complementarity: The Catholic Inspiration*. In: <http://www.endowonline.com/metadot/attachment/download/52748>

serve for the development of certain new thoughts, but for limited scope only. In fact they risk sterility because of narrowness or one-sidedness and therefore are of little import in the wider cultural field."²⁰

But, as Benedict XVI pointed up, "the market of gratuitousness does not exist, and attitudes of gratuitousness cannot be established by law. Yet both the market and politics need individuals who are open to reciprocal gift".²¹ Therefore in speaking about the uniqueness of the activity of the woman, it is necessary to stress that much depends upon her social maturity and faith that permit a woman to choose to assume this responsibility for her own reason and feminine intuition rather than to rise to the present bait of individual self-expression and power. This asks a serious measure of reflection, consciousness and also meditation vis-à-vis the Holy Face of the Lord. "A woman's dignity is closely connected with the love which she receives by the very reason of her femininity; it is likewise connected with the love which she gives in return."²² So we, women, can ask ourselves: do I really perceive myself as Gift – the gift of God for others and my life as His gift to me? Therefore John Paul II says: "A Catholic woman has to find the time everyday to stand before the Lord and to hear how He loves her, how He trusts her giving her a heart, which is able to open to Love and radiate love to others"²³.

A contemplative "action" is a basis for all other woman's actions. Like Mary, we too – women and men of the Church – today are called not only to proclaim and live the Gospel message, but also to realize and live heroic acts of faith and most especially to help "bring to birth" the personal faith – the "yes, I believe" – of others, especially that of the children entrusted to our care,²⁴ and to bear witness to this faith through the communal and social action.

²⁰ Von le Fort G., *The Eternal Woman* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Co., 1962), 39.

²¹ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate* (2009), 39.

²² John Paul II, *Mulieris Dignitatem*, 30.

²³ John Paul II, *The Prayer of Catholic Woman*.

²⁴ *Towards a New Feminism*. Interview with Michele Schumacher, Zenit org., March 8, 2007.