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EMPLOYMENT : FOCUS ON HOUSEWORK

by
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1. Introduction

My mother was a nurse. When she gave birth to me, she quit her job to take care of her first-born. She became "unemployed". Two years later, my brother was born. Soon after, we left for Sabah to where my father was transferred. We returned to our hometown. My little brother was old enough not to demand my mother's constant attention. So my mother decided to leave us in grandma's care. My mother resumed nursing but resigned after the birth of my sister. My mother has been cooking and washing for all 13 of us and my father for the last 15 years. And the statistics department registers her as "unemployed." – A Son.

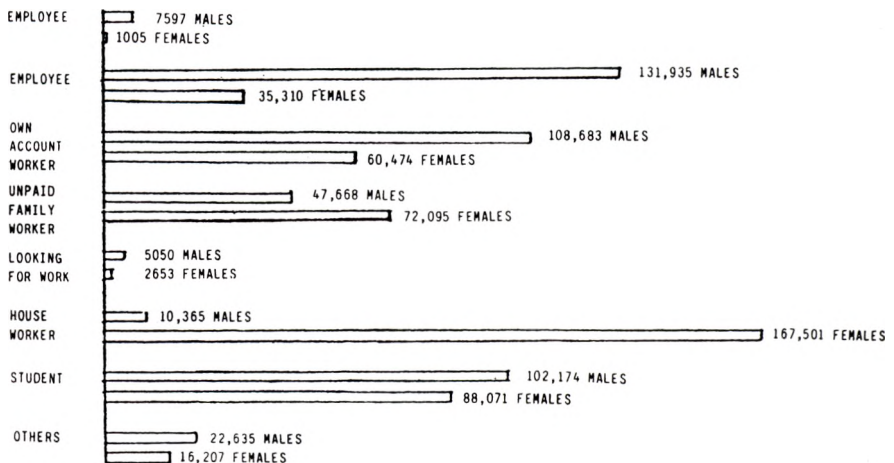
Has the mother done anything? Has she made any contribution to the family and society? Is her contribution in monetary terms? How is her contribution to be quantified and evaluated? How does she view her work?

This article intends to answer these questions and examine various views on housework. It aims to create an awareness of the value of work done by houseworkers so that men and even women themselves appreciate their contribution.

2. Classification of Houseworkers

The Department of Statistics classifies houseworkers "outside the labour force." In 1980, there were 177,866 houseworkers in Sarawak. Most of them (94%) were housewives.

The figure below shows the population aged 10 years and above by usual activity status and sex in Sarawak in 1980.



Source : **1980 Population and Housing Census of Malaysia**

State Population Report, Sarawak, Part 2, Table 6.5 p.825.

Key

Employers	: Persons who employ one or more persons.
Employees	: Persons who work for someone for pay.
Own account workers	: Persons who work by themselves and do not employ anybody else though they may have family helpers.
Unpaid family workers	: Persons who work without pay in a farm or a business run by another member of the family.
Others	: A residual category of all persons who do not fall into any of the other categories (for example, the retired or the disabled).

If houseworkers had been classified as part of the labour force, they would have made up 27.35% of the total labour force. Furthermore, female houseworkers or housewives would have formed 25.76% of the labour force. In fact, they formed the largest population in the labour force.

3. Definition of Work and Employment

Work is the exertion of physical and mental efforts. It involves a measure of toil. The outcomes are goods and services to satisfy our needs and wants. Whenever there is work done, there is employment. Therefore, housework, together with other paid occupations in sales, production and services, is a form of employment even though it yields no direct monetary returns.

According to this criterion, Sarawak housewives are "employed" because they provide services such as cooking, baking, serving, washing, cleaning, taking care of the young, the sick and the aged, weeding and gardening, tidying and decorating the home, mending and sewing. Their work produces cooked food, cakes, drinks, handicrafts and sewn clothes, a clean tidy and cosy home, a tidy garden with flowers, and even fruits and vegetables occasionally.

Housewives are so occupied with the quantity of work that they cannot seek paid employment outside the house. About 75% of housewives gave "housework" as the reason for not seeking work in 1986. They did not see "housework" as work; they did not think they had contributed anything to the family or society and hence they had a low opinion of themselves and have been considered "unemployed".

4. Awareness of the Value of Housework

The advent of the cash economy resulting in paid employment leads to the association of employment with wages. Hence housewives are "unemployed" because they do not receive wages. Housework has no cash value in the cash economy. In the urban cash economy, the housewife who does not work outside the house does not contribute cash to the household as her husband does. Therefore she is accorded a low status.

On the contrary, in subsistence non-cash economy housework is not perceived as 'unemployment'. In some traditional societies in South East Asia, for example, both men and women are involved in the food production and other services which sustain the community. There is division of labour – the men generally hunt and collect jungle produce while the women look after the farm and the home. Women are esteemed members of the community, having equal say in family decisions as their husbands.

5. Calculation of Contribution of Housewives

Given the informal market for housework by housewives, we may be confronted with the problem of valuation of housework in monetary terms. Three criteria may be considered for this purpose.

Firstly, the wages of domestic help may be used as an indicator. In Kuching, for instance, a stay-in domestic help receives \$100 to \$200 per month from a private employer. The exact pay depends on the employer's judgement on the quantity and quality of the housework and the difficulties of getting a reliable worker. The employer may pay a bit more if the domestic help takes care of kids in addition to cooking, cleaning the house and washing clothes. Established institutions such as the government (ministers) and the hierarchical church (bishops, priests) may pay as much as \$300 per month.

Secondly, the monetary returns for the work done may take into account the wages foregone by the housewife. The housewife could have worked for pay. By being a full-time housewife, she foregoes her pay and should be compensated as such. This method has two weaknesses. The first weakness is that it overlooks the productivity of the houseworker. For instance, a housewife may be a lecturer receiving \$1500 per month before she quits to become a houseworker. If she decides to take up the housework, she may not be a good houseworker. In this case she is more productive in monetary terms being a lecturer. This method therefore, should not be used to evaluate the monetary returns of the housework.

The second weakness is the reverse of the above case : a good houseworker may not find a better paid employment because she is not skilled in it. Therefore, she would receive a very low pay if she is so employed. This low pay, therefore, does not reflect objectively her productivity as a houseworker. Moreover, the fluctuation of the market wage tied with economic changes may not include fully the wage she should have been offered.

Finally, the time spent on housework may be used as a guide. The more time spent on the housework, the more is its value. Three methods may be used to ascertain the length of time spent on housework: self-recording, interviewing and observation. There are limitations to these methods, however. Self-recording is possible only if the houseworker is literate. Interviewing, which requires recall by the respondents, depends on memory and may be inaccurate. Observation, being very subjective, provides a wealth of information. If the length of time of housework can be ascertained, its monetary value can be determined and be appreciated subsequently.

6. Employers' Attitudes Towards Housework

Since housewives give supporting services to their husbands, the latter's services as employees are enhanced. Therefore employers should pay the husbands sufficient wages to maintain the housewives who contribute the supporting services. Japanese companies, for example, pay their employees sufficient to maintain not only the employees themselves but also their wives and even other members of their families.

In Malaysia, however, employers' offers of wages depend on the profits the employees bring rather than the need to maintain the employees and their supporting housewives. The basic needs of the employees may be considered so as to keep them working for the employers, but the needs of the supporting housewives and other members of the family are not taken into account. Only on rare occasions do employers increase the wages of their employees so that the employees can maintain their wives. For example, a wife may have to quit her paid employment in order to take care of her new-born child. In this case, the household income will be reduced while the household expenditure will be increased to maintain the additional member, the new-born child. The husband may ask his employer to increase his wage and the employer may consider his request in the light of the new circumstances. If the husband is indispensable to the employer, his request may be granted.

7. **Humanisation of Work**

Housework may also be viewed from the personal perspective of the housewife. Housework should be fulfilling, that is the housewife feels happy to work. It should help the housewife realise her self-worth and meaningful contribution through her abilities in housework.

Housework such as taking care of the sick and the aged may not be appreciated. However, nurses and social workers doing the same work in hospitals and welfare institutions are not only paid but also commended for their services. Similarly, housewives who volunteer to help out with welfare organisations such as Cheshire Home, Home for the Aged, Salvation Army and the Blind Centre are appreciated and recognised. They feel happy with their contribution too.

8. **Conclusion**

The housework done by housewives, especially that in rural areas and developing countries, supports the household in various ways and, indirectly, the economy. Although housewives are not officially classified as part of the labour force and there is no formal wage rate for housework, it does not mean that their work is worthless. They are indispensable in the daily economic activities of the family and the country. However, it is difficult to evaluate housewives' contribution in monetary terms.

Besides the monetary returns of housework to society, the housewife should get personal satisfaction from housework. Houseworkers are urgently needed to be educated so that they may realise their contribution and improve their self-image. Only when they view their activities positively can they expect appreciation from the other "employees" and a reclassification of their labour status by the Department of Statistics.

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