

Invisible Labor: Historiographical review

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The concept of invisible labor encompasses a range of activities. These activities are often performed by women that remain unrecognized, undervalued, or excluded from traditional definitions of work. Those activities include and are made up of unpaid domestic tasks, caregiving, emotional labor, and volunteer work. Despite their centrality to the functioning of householding and economies, such activities are frequently dismissed as non-productive with serious implications for gender inequality and social justice. This historiography examines the key debates and contributions to the study of women's invisible labor tracing its conceptual evolution from early feminist critiques to contemporary interdisciplinary perspectives by exploring the cultural, economic, and psychological dimensions of invisible labor.

Many of the authors come from different diverse groups who have analyzed the cultural, economic, and psychological dimensions of invisible labor. Each has provided critical insights that have advanced understanding of invisible labor and how to impact society particularly in relation to gender inequality and social justice. Arlene Daniels was a sociologist whose paper provided a foundational critique of how labor was defined and valued. She introduced and created the term “invisible labor”. She used it to describe unpaid tasks such as caregiving and household work that are essential but often excluded from traditional definitions of work. She argued that societal norms prioritize paid labor in public spheres while regulating unpaid domestic work. Her work laid the foundation for future interdisciplinary research on invisible labor.

Crain and others are scholars in labor law, sociology and technological studies who, in their collective work, have brought in the scope of invisible labor to include formal workplace dynamics. They also draw on Hoshchild's concept of emotional labor and how women are disproportionately required to manage emotions and professional settings. Their work is

important and understanding how invisible labor operates in both domestic and professional environments where it continues to be undervalued and unregulated. Corrine Field is a historian who examines the historical intersections of gender, race, and age in the context of labor and societal roles. She explores how Enlightenment ideals were applied exclusively to men leaving women and others in a state of perpetual dependence. Her analysis situates women's invisible labor within broader struggles for recognition as independent adults. Her contributions are essential for understanding the historical roots of labor and how they inform modern inequalities and work in citizenship.

Rose Hackman is a journalist and author who has provided a contemporary exploration of emotional labor in both professional and personal settings. She builds on the earlier scholarship by analyzing how societal expectations require women to manage their emotions and be the ones to maintain harmony in their relationships, often at the expense of their mental health. She also brings in the topic of the psychological toll of emotional labor emphasizing the need for societal recognition and systematic change. Her work has created a connecting line to invisible labor and mental health in a modern era, which also connects to the Arizona study who have talked about the physical, mental, and emotional toll that invisible labor has, connecting all the work together to create a scientific and medical understanding of invisible labor.

The historical marginalization of a woman's work stems from the established societal norms that associate labor with financial compensation and public visibility. In her seminal 1987 paper, Daniels critiques these restrictive “folk concept[s]” of work which prioritize paid labor while devaluing unpaid domestic and caregiving tasks. According to Daniels, this conceptual limitation reinforces the gender hierarchy by relegating women's contributions to the private sphere outside the domain of recognized labor. She also highlights the need for a broader

understanding of work that includes the invisible efforts of women in sustaining families and communities.¹

Building on Daniels insights, Field situates women's invisible labor within historical struggles for recognition as independent adults. She explores how enlightenment ideals of reason and maturity were exclusively applied to white men. This left women and non-white individuals in a state of perpetual dependence or infantilization. By linking labor to maturity and citizenship, Field underscores the broader societal structures that perpetrate the invisibility of women's contributions.² Those ideas justified the exclusion of women from economic and public spheres and framed their unpaid domestic work as a natural extension of their natural roles rather than as skilled labor deserving of recognition and pay.

Many early feminist thinkers, like Perkins Gilman, also echo the criticism of the undervaluation of women's domestic labor. Gilman also advocated for the rationalization of housework that envisioned communal solutions such as shared childcare and dining facilities all to help reduce the burden placed on women. Her proposals reflected an emerging awareness of the economic and social cost of invisible labor. They largely adhere to traditional notions that productive work is that which generates monetary value. Despite the limitations, Gilman's work is very influential and important in the foundation building of understanding the systemic undervaluation of women's invisible labor.

Many reasons scholarship has created an extensive understanding of invisible labor is to include the emotional but also formalized workplace dynamics. Crain and others work explores

¹ Daniels, Arlene Kaplan. "Invisible Work." *Social Problems* 34, no. 5 (1987): 403–15.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/800538>.

² Corinne T. Field. *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood : Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America*. Gender and American Culture. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.
<https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=e025xna&AN=810486&site=ehost-live>

the tasks within formal employment that remain hidden from the public and its scrutiny. Drawing on Hochschild's concept of “emotion work”, the authors analyze that workers, particularly women, are required to manage their emotions as part of their jobs often without acknowledgment or compensation. An example of this which they give are flight attendants and their efforts to appear caring and composed which are integral to their employers’ profitability; however, many of those efforts are really recognized as labor.³ Society has created a patriarchal environment where we expect more of women without compensation especially in the work environment. As of six years ago, there are people who still think women shouldn't be in the workplace⁴. The patriarchal influence is still in play today and has held to the power and expectations they have of women, where they should be, and what they should be doing.

Building and continuing on that foundation, many recent and current studies have found the profound emotional and psychological toll of invisible labor. Research studies such as *The Hidden Toll: How Invisible Labor Contributes to Women's Mental Health* from Arizona, demonstrate and highlight how the sustained burden of caregiving, household management, and emotional labor contributes to stress, anxiety, and burnout among women.⁵ Their findings highlight invisible labor and how it is not merely an abstract sociological concept but a lived experience with significant mental health consequences. Psychological impacts of invisible labor are supported by its lack of recognition. When women's work is devalued or dismissed as “natural” or “expected,” it reinforces feelings of being undervalued and overburdened. That dynamic created a cycle of societal norms, normalizing those gendered responsibilities and

³ Marion G. Crain, Winifred Poster, and Miriam A. Cherry, *Invisible Labor: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

⁴https://www.reddit.com/r/unpopularopinion/comments/anuula/women_shouldve_never_entered_the_workforce/?rdt=43641

⁵ <https://apal.arizona.edu/hidden-toll-how-invisible-labor-contributes-womens-mental-health>

leaving women to carry the emotional and psychological weight of maintaining harmony in both domestic and professional environments.⁶

The invisibility of such tasks often stem from societal bases that frame them as natural extensions of women's roles rather than as work requiring skill and effort. This is compounded by structural factors such as the lack of legal protections for emotional unpaid labor. There's an emphasis on the importance of interdisciplinary approaches comprised of sociology, law, and feminist theory to help address the systematic undervaluation of invisible labor. Understanding the characterization of labor has been profoundly influenced by societal norms- norms that assign different roles and values to men and women. Much of the labor has been divided into productive and reproductive categories where productive is often performed by men and reproductive by women. That division reinforces the notion that men are suited for roles requiring physical strength, leadership, Etc., While women are naturally seen to be inclined to caregiving and domestic roles. That dichotomy not only dictates the types of work men and women perform but perpetrates the devaluation of labor typically done by women.

Daniels critiques the binary of labor in her work, noting how societal understandings of work exclude unpaid domestic and caregiving labor. For work, women's contributions are often seen as moral obligations rather than skilled or valuable work. That devaluation has grown from the gender expectations where men's labor is characterized as visible to others, essential, and tied to economic productivity, all while women's work is obscured and dismissed as secondary. Gilman's critique also echoes that sentiment. She argued for the rationalization of domestic labor to free women from those constraints and challenge the assumption that such tasks are naturally

⁶ Marion G. Crain, Winifred Poster, and Miriam A. Cherry, *Invisible Labor: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

feminine.⁷ Those perspectives demonstrate the ongoing relevance of their critiques, while highlighting as well the urgent need for policy interventions.

The past gendered characterizations persist in contemporary context. As previously explained, women are disproportionately tasked with managing emotions in both professional and personal settings. Jobs requiring emotional labor such as teaching, nursing, and customer service are viewed as extensions of women's "natural" caregiving roles rather than as demanding skills worthy of equitable compensation. Similar research as previously stated highlights how those expectations not only undervalue women's work but also contribute to the significant emotional and psychological strain.

The neglect of women's invisible labor has had far-reaching consequences. It has perpetuated economic inequality by excluding unpaid and emotional labor for measures of productivity and wealth. That omission also reinforces gender norms that limit women's opportunities for financial independence and professional advancement. Which continues the cycle of infantilization and creating a separating dependance. Daniels notes the societal devaluation of women's work and how it extends to their own perceptions. Many of those women internalize the belief that their contributions are unvalued.⁸ This will reference the psychological toll of invisible labor and its beating power on women.

Moreover, the invisibility of labor within the formal environment and its relationships create challenges for policy and regulation. It highlighted how the unregulated nature of

⁷ Daniels, Arlene Kaplan. "Invisible Work." *Social Problems* 34, no. 5 (1987): 403–15. <https://doi.org/10.2307/800538>.

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emotional labor leaves workers vulnerable to exploitation as employers will benefit off their efforts without providing adequate compensation or support.⁹

The gendered division of labor was around for a while and the historical roots in Enlightenment thinking was explored by Field. She traces how concepts of labor and maturity were linked to gender and race. While white men were viewed as naturally suited to self-governance and public work, women were confined to roles of perpetual dependence and subservience. Those ideas have been around for a while and justified the exclusion of women from paid labor and reinforced stereotypes that persist even now.¹⁰

The concept of invisible labor holds a significant importance and understanding of how society's function both historically and presently. Invisible labor encompasses the essential activities that sustain families, communities and economies. Despite its centrality, labor often goes unacknowledged leaving its contributors - predominantly women - undervalued and unsupported. Recognizing invisible labor is a critical concept for addressing the systemic inequities and fostering and more inclusive understanding of work.

In the modern context, invisible labor becomes particularly important and evident in discussions around mental health, workplace equity, and social policy. As previously mentioned in the study by Arizona State, the burden of invisible labor often leads to stress, anxiety, and burnout. The psychological impact demonstrates how invisible labor is not just a concept, but a reality with consequences. By doing research and understanding those effects, we can better

⁹ Marion G. Crain, Winifred Poster, and Miriam A. Cherry, *Invisible Labor: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

¹⁰ Corinne T. Field. *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood : Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America*. Gender and American Culture. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

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support individuals who perform that labor whether through mental health resources or policies that redistribute caregiving responsibilities.

The undervaluation of invisible labor perpetrates economic inequality as tasks like emotional labor and caregiving are rarely included in productivity or wealth. In many professional settings, emotional labor is crucial for maintaining workplace harmony and customer satisfaction, but it is often uncompensated and unregulated. Recognizing how it works and its importance could lead to better workplace policies, better pay structures, and better support systems that can benefit both workers and employers.

Lastly, unpaid caregiving roles and domestic work disproportionately fall on women from lower income or marginalized communities that push the existing inequalities even further apart, Harming both the economic and racial dimensions. The racial dimensions of invisible labor have revealed significant disparities in how work is assigned, valued, and experienced. Historically, racism and economic inequality have disproportionately burdened women of color with invisible labor both in their own households and unpaid caregiving roles for others. As well as how a woman of color often performed labor for wealthier families while managing their own responsibilities, that pattern reflects the longstanding structure of racial and class exploitation dating back to slavery in the United states when black women caregiving and domestic work sustained white households and perpetrated their economic marginalization..

Crain and others emphasize how race and class intersect to compound the burdens of invisible labor. Immigrant women and women of color are disproportionately occupying undervalued caregiving roles where their work as previously mentioned is an extension of their cultural or racial identity.¹¹ Stereotypes of the strong black woman, as an example, which

¹¹ Marion G. Crain, Winifred Poster, and Miriam A. Cherry, *Invisible Labor: Hidden Work in the Contemporary World* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016).

perpetrates a myth of emotional resilience masking the psychological toll of caregiving as another form of invisible labor performed by black women. Many women in lower class, low-income, or immigrant communities face higher levels of stress, anxiety, and burnout due to sustained pressures of caregiving household management and emotional labor. As previously mentioned by the Arizona study, they highlight how the pressure contributes to significant health disparities underscoring the importance of addressing the racialized dimensions of invisible labor.¹²

It is also important to recognize Fields' historical context for those disparities, the tracing of how racial and gender hierarchies have shaped the perception of labor, and how Enlightenment ideals have racialized to exclude women and non-white individuals casting them into roles of dependence and servitude.¹³ This is something that has historically evolved over a long time and is still in play today. Currently, we see in modern times house management and caregiving are predominantly filled with low-income and non-white individuals. It has also impacted how we think of those jobs and roles. Society has created the stereotype of people of color in roles that fall under the category of invisible labor roles.

In that sense, recognizing and addressing the disparities of invisible labor is essential not only for achieving gender equity, but also fostering a more just society overall. Having that understanding allows for a reimagination of work that accounts for the diverse ways people can contribute and be supported in both visible and invisible ways. Invisible labor has been created from disparities and norms in society and has continued to modern time. However, work and research has been done to improve the societal cages of invisible labor for women. Women are

¹² <https://apal.arizona.edu/hidden-toll-how-invisible-labor-contributes-womens-mental-health>

¹³ Corinne T. Field. *The Struggle for Equal Adulthood: Gender, Race, Age, and the Fight for Citizenship in Antebellum America*. Gender and American Culture. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2014.

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starting to challenge and change many of the deeply rooted systems that have previously constrained them. Also, the idea of invisible labor is being treated more and not being dismissed prematurely is impactful. It has caused and led to many draining and detrimental mental health problems.

The study of women's invisible labor has revealed the deep-seated cultural and structural biases that shape our understanding of work. By examining the roots as well as the historical and contemporary manifestations of this phenomenon, scholars have brought to light the critical role of unpaid and emotional labor in sustaining economies and societies. Those efforts to bring visibility to invisible labor have contributed to a broader understanding of how gendered divisions of labor have evolved over time and have continued to influence societal norms. Contemporary research continues to offer important insight and perspectives on how labor is defined and how it impacts individuals and communities.