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>> **A Lexicon for Bridging Decolonial Queer Feminisms and Materialist Feminisms (/issue-11-1)**

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# Housewifization

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- Aude Abou Nasr - Labor

The term housewifization was coined in 1982 by the German Marxist ecofeminist Maria Mies, referring to the capitalist process of naturalising and devaluing women's labour by socially and ideologically defining them as housewives, irrespective of whether they are *de facto* housewives or not (1986:180). Maria Mies is known and remembered as a recalcitrant Marxist thinker who made poignant feminist interventions in the study of global development, capitalism, patriarchy, and colonialism from the perspective of women and their lives, bodies, and labours.[1] Like other materialist and autonomist feminists from that epoch – including Silvia Federici, Veronica Humboldt, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Selma James, Maria Mies defied orthodox interpretations of capitalism as a supposedly European-born production system that solely depends on the exploitation of paid labour, by center-staging the unacknowledged role and value of "women, colonies, and nature" in the accumulation of capital. Mies argued that "production" and "reproduction" should be viewed as two dialectically enmeshed realms of "one intrinsically interconnected system," that she termed "capitalist-patriarchy," rather than in terms of a "two-system" theory. In her integrative analysis of capitalist patriarchy, the logic of proletarianization that pushed the "free" proletarian to sell his labour power in return for a wage could only materialize through the taken for granted "free" labours of love, care, and social reproduction performed by "his" non-free housewife.

For Mies, this sexual division of labour is intrinsically international, and rooted in global and ongoing historical processes of colonialism and slavery. In the famous chapter "Housewifization and Colonization" of her book *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale* (1986:92), she writes:

> These more than a hundred years that "slave women in the Caribbean were neither wives nor mothers" were exactly the same period that women of the European bourgeoisie were domesticated and ideologically manipulated into wifehood and motherhood as their "natural" vocation. While one set of women was treated as pure labour force, a source of energy, the other set of women was treated as "non-productive" breeders only.

Mies started developing her argument of housewifization in her iconic masterpiece *The Lace Makers of Narsapur*: *Indian Housewives Produce for the World Market* (1982), in which she provides a detailed ethnographic account of women's involvement in India's lace making industry. The lace workers in question were home-based women, creating and assembling garments,

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tablecloths, and bedspreads that were intended for export. Although the lace makers worked six to eight hours per day, they were still identified as housewives who did not appear in employment and development statistics. Expanding on Marx's crucial yet limited understanding of the working day, Mies meticulously described the endless work that the lace makers performed from their homes, and the sheer impossibility to distinguish between "production" and "reproduction" relations. She also observed how the contributions of the lace makers were not considered as work that produced value to the capitalist economy, but rather labeled as housework or subsistence work at most. She introduced the concept of "housewifization" to explain that, despite their full incorporation into a capitalist export-oriented production system as wage labourers, "the lace makers' integration was premised on their self-understanding as housewives who depend on the wage of the husband or breadwinner, although in reality their subsistence and income generating activities are work" (1982:110). She therefore suggested that housewives could be considered as capitalism's optimal labour force, contributing to capital accumulation but not identifying as workers, which is how their work became devalued.

Marxist and decolonial feminist scholars took up Mies' powerful trope, to argue that housewifization was not a unique process for Indian lace makers but could be viewed as a structural feature of capitalist economies, which reduces more and more types of casualised labor to "housework," i.e. un(der)paid labour performed in the private sphere. Kalindi Vora (2019) included many forms of domestic work, clinical labour performed by surrogates and egg cell providers, crowdsourced digital labour, and sweatshop work, arguing that "these forms of labour have little in common except that they are deemed to be uncreative or reproductive, and therefore while they are performed by people of any gender, the work itself is feminised, a process that Mies called 'housewifisation'."

In my own research on the Georgian surrogacy industry and global fertility chains, I found housewifization a particularly useful concept to understand processes of devaluation, naturalization, and invisibilization of surrogates' "motherwork" (Vertommen and Barbagallo 2021; Vertommen 2021). During my fieldwork in Tbilisi in 2018, I noted how Georgian women are increasingly opting to perform gestational labour, not only because it pays much better than conventional forms of employment, but because it allows them to combine it with motherhood, in many cases single motherhood. Elena, for instance, a single mother eight months pregnant in her first surrogacy pregnancy, explained that she would have to work for three years as a

laboratory assistant to earn the same amount ($15,000) as she does now while "doing nothing, except for being pregnant" (interview, Tbilisi, June 21, 2018). "Being" a surrogate also permitted Elena to stay at home to take care of her toddler, as she could not afford to pay for childcare when she worked outside of the house. However, when asked whether she considered surrogacy to be her job or profession, Elena adamantly answered "no" (interview, Tbilisi, June 21, 2018). Despite all the physical and emotional labour involved in gestating the fetus and the time spent on medical appointments, meetings with the fertility agents, and conversations with the intended parents, she refused to view surrogacy as her work. She clarified: "Pregnancy is an automatic thing; it's just happening on its own. I am just being a mother and a housewife, and I am doing this because I desperately need the money."

"Being" a good mother was not only a crucial motivation for Elena to become a surrogate motherworker, but it was also a requirement for recruitment. As Elena's surrogacy agent had explained to her, only women who have already birthed their own child(ren) were accepted to become surrogates as this makes it less likely that the surrogate would want to keep the surrogacy baby after birth (interview, Tbilisi, May 12, 2018). It also proves that their gestational bodies and reproductive biologies are in good shape. While the Georgian surrogacy industry depends on the mutually formative work of motherhood, pregnancy, and surrogacy, for Elena, both the unwaged reproductive work of mothering and the paid reproductive work of gestating were viewed as an existential state of being, rather than as a performative state of laboring (Vertommen and Barbagallo 2021).

This naturalization of the reproductive labors of ovulation, gestation, and parturition is a structural feature in capitalist economies. Even in the Georgian surrogacy industry, where surrogates are undeniably paid for their gestational services, fertility brokers still use the language of gift-giving or altruism to promote their services (Lewis 2019). This implies that Georgian surrogates are never given a salary or a wage, but rather a "fee" or "compensation." Even when they are paid, they are not fully waged reproductive workers with labour contracts and rights protected by national labour codes (Rudrappa 2015).

This housewifization of surrogates, which transforms their work into "a thing they do for financial help," is further enhanced by the fact that they perform their gestational labor alone "at home." The societal stigma surrounding surrogacy has forced many Georgian surrogates to remain as invisible as possible. Every time I met Elena, for instance, it was in the new flat she

moved into during the seventh month of her pregnancy, to avoid gossip from her neighbors. Even when I interviewed her during the day, the curtains of the apartment would be closed, and she wore baggy clothes in order to hide her bump.

My interviews with Georgian surrogates illustrated that many sought to remain as invisible as possible to avoid being seen and shamed by nosy neighbours, to evade taxation by the state, and to protect themselves against the interference of intended parents or surrogacy agents. However, this invisibility is also structurally enforced by society and one of the reasons why surrogates do not easily identify as workers (Vertommen and Barbagallo 2021). The hesitation or even refusal of a workers' consciousness and identity in turn deepens practices of hyperexploitation in the fertility industry.

Inspired by Mies' powerful ethnographic work with the Indian lace maker, I decided to collaborate with the Tbilisi-based *Solidarity Network*, a grassroots union that organises with precarious workers, to set up a Surrogacy Hotline, which surrogates can contact, through its Facebook and other social media pages, for more information about their rights when entering a surrogacy agreement. Based on close readings of surrogacy contracts and follow-up interviews with surrogates, oocyte providers, and other fertility industry workers, we compiled a know-your-rights document that was translated into Georgian. The document addresses various matters, including health and life insurance, wages, reproductive decision-making, and legal representation of surrogates. Although Maria Mies herself was a long-time member of FINRRAGE (Feminist International Network of Resistance to Reproductive and Genetic Engineering) that avidly opposed surrogacy, we decided to refrain from using moralizing rescue narratives in our communication with (potential) surrogates. Rather than *a priori* dissuading them from entering a surrogacy agreement or convincing them to look for other more socially acceptable means of income, we wanted to provide them with some basic and independent medical and legal insights about the surrogacy procedure, allowing them to negotiate – either individually or collectively – for better working conditions. Secondly, we were adamant in approaching the surrogates as "motherworkers" and look at the dis/continuities between their reluctant workers identification as paid surrogates and unpaid mothers, in line with Mies' observation that it is impossible to neatly separate between capitalist relations of "production" and "reproduction." Rather than viewing Georgian women's family-oriented subjectivity as a sign of conservative backwardness or as a hurdle for their emancipation as "real workers," we aimed to draw the connections between their gendered conditions of work

at home and in the fertility clinic and surrogacy agency. Third, we were keen to build connections and solidarities between surrogates and other un/paid reproductive workers, including nurses, mothers, domestic workers, egg cell providers, and cleaners, to see whether and how their working conditions share elements of invisibilization, precarization, and devalorization.

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