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**Question 4: Outline a current environmental, political, or social issue that requires redesign. Explain how you will solve this issue over the duration of your future design career. Underline the tools and approaches you will use and discuss how and why.**

Women's role in society has progressed infinitely in recent years, yet there are systemic prejudices that we still have failed to overcome. Women's work is a term that encompasses all of the unpaid physical, emotional, social and domestic labours historically associated with being a woman, such as childrearing, needlework, cleaning and cooking, originally stemming from an old rhyming couplet "A man can work from sun to sun, but a woman's work is never done". This essay will explore the meaning of women's work in today's world, the issues surrounding it, and what I as a designer can do to change this.

The typical Monday-Friday 40-hour week work schedule was formed on the basis that women would be homemakers and the men would be breadwinners. In the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we saw a societal shift towards both men and women being expected to work and have careers, as Zoe Young writes, "Fulfilment and success in both occupational and domestic domains is presented as something for middle class women to strive for" (2018, p.3). However, this new ideology has arguably come at a cost for the very women whom it aimed to empower, as many mothers are expected to take a double shift of labour, continuing to be homemakers whilst "breadwinning" simultaneously (Fox, Pascal, Warren, 2009, p.314). As shown in figure 1, unpaid labour is disproportionately done by women, in fact, women do on average 60% more unpaid labour than men (Office for National Statistics, 2016). Despite progression in equality, there are a growing number of women becoming disillusioned with the grind of the "working mother" model, with the "Tradwife" movement gaining in popularity through 2020 on Tiktok and other social media sites. These women have rehashed the traditional values of the housewife for the digital age, creating content based around cleaning, tending to the husband and grocery shopping. Although some of this content can be dismissed as tongue-in-cheek nostalgia, there is a troubling undertone of anti-feminist values, despite feminism being responsible for having the right to choose. Another solution for women has been to shun traditional family life altogether. Due to changing attitudes, advances in contraception and abortion laws (Astrup, 2016), it has become easier for people with female anatomy to choose when and if they have children. More women are opting to not have children for one reason or another, especially feeling that it is necessary to be childless if they are to pursue a career to the same extent as a man.

## Average hours of unpaid work done per week in each category for men and women, UK, 2015

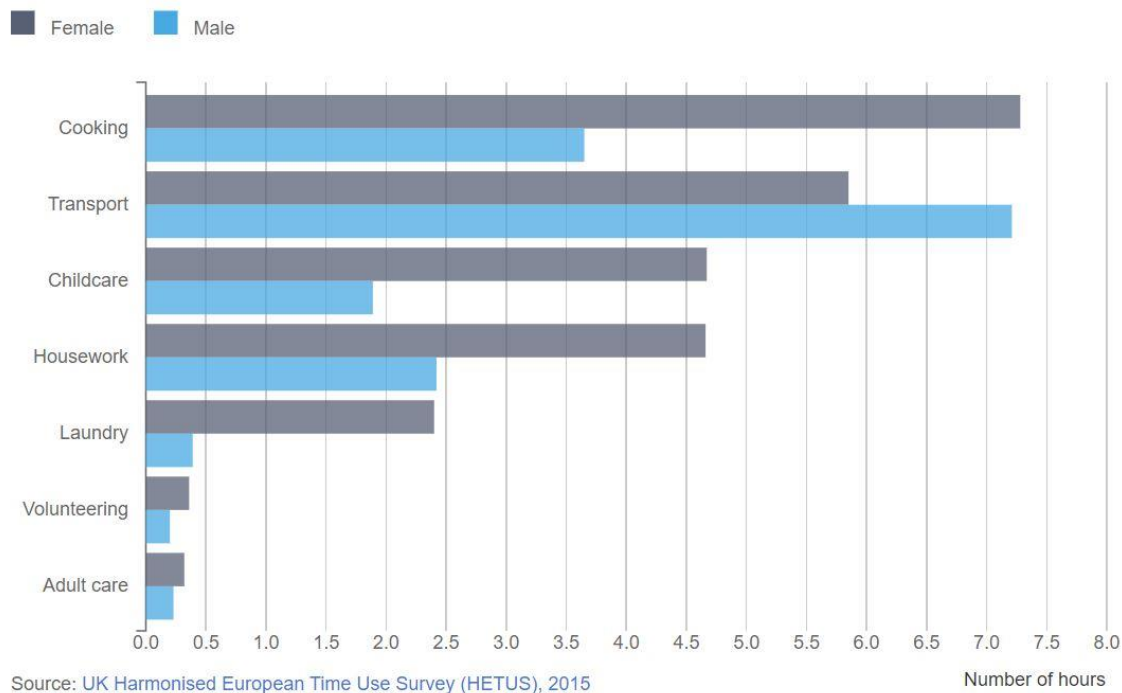


**Fig. 1**

Childcare is one of the biggest challenges women face when choosing jobs and employment (Young 2018, p.4). In 1992 the EU Council Recommendation on Childcare promoted initiatives that supported the sharing of family care responsibilities equally between women and men (p314, work family policies fathers article). Since then (even before Britain left the EU) the UK has made no change to the maternity/paternity leave allowances; women are legally allowed to take 52 weeks paid leave, whereas men are given just 2 weeks. The assumption that women will stay at home to look after children whilst men work is outdated and a career break can be detrimental to women's careers. There is also a two year gap between the end of the typical 12 month's paid maternity leave allowance, and the providing of state childcare in the UK (15 hours a week free from age 3). This means that many women are forced to make choices about their careers in order to make time for family life; Part-time, flexible and home working arrangements are disproportionately favoured (Mandell, Pupo, Duffy, 2019, p.74). Although this seems like a positive solution, it can make women less favourable options for employment in a fast-paced, target driven masculine world – in the words of Zoe Young “there is a life and career stage when women get stuck or get out of the pipeline to the top jobs in organisations and it corresponds with motherhood” (2018, p.3). Although direct gender pay differences have been mostly eliminated, (Hakim, 2018) factors such as “discontinuous work histories” (Hakim, 2018) have meant that in many seemingly modern and egalitarian societies, women in heterosexual relationships “continue to be heavily [financially] dependent on male partners” (Hakim, 2018, p.50). Hakim's findings also indicate that men in dual earner households in all countries studied (including the UK) typically contributed double the earnings to that of their wives. Hakim also notes that dual earner does not equate to dual career, and the percentage of dual career couples is extremely low (10-20%)(2018, p.50).

It is not just the glass ceiling (Gorrill, 2020, p.155) in career progression that is creating a disparity in lifetime earnings for women. The common nature of maternal part-time work is that it is predominantly at the lower occupational levels (Young, 2018), meaning lower pay, no career progression, and no pension funds or working benefits. These types of female dominated jobs (Office for national statistics, 2013) are often in the care sector or have aspects of care to them (care workers, nursery assistants, support workers, teaching assistants) and therefore come with an added emotional burden (Puig De La Bellacasa, 2017 p.2) Puig De La Bellacasa writes that “the affective and ethical dispositions involved in worry, concern in taking responsibility for other’s wellbeing such as “caring about” and “taking care of” need to be supported by material practices – traditionally understood as maintenance or concrete work in actualising care” (2017, p.4). This expectation on women to practice good ethics of care (Tronto, 1993), whilst also not being appropriately compensated for the workload, is a theme that runs through women’s work. The Office for National Statistics states that “Men also hugely outnumber women in skilled trades: jobs like farmers, mechanics, electricians and chefs. In this occupation group, there is a larger pay gap (25%) in favour of men” (2017) Whilst also stating that:

“Women are much more likely than men to work in low-paid sectors like care and leisure, as well as in administrative and secretarial jobs. Four out of five full-time care and leisure roles are performed by women, but these women earn 9% less per hour, on average, than their male counterparts” (2017)

These statistics themselves are eye opening, but it also begs questions – what constitutes a “skilled trade” and why are stereotypically feminine skills such as caring nearly always spoken of in terms of the “low-paid” and “unskilled” sector?

Sewing, mending and making items for the home has been a large part of women’s work throughout time, however, in the past 50 years needlework has mostly disappeared from the domestic landscape. The outsourcing of labour in the fashion and textiles industry to countries such as Bangladesh and China (Marcketti, Karpova, 2020, p.87) has meant that a large part of western women’s domestic duties have been eliminated. Fixing and making garments for the family is no longer a necessity, with cheap clothing readily available at shops such as Primark for as little as £1. Shifting labour onto largely female workers in lesser economically developed countries creates an ethical dilemma, as often the working conditions are dangerous and the workers are underpaid - the average garment worker’s earnings in Bangladesh are below the national poverty line. This change in the source of female labour raises dilemmas with racist and classist connotations; somebody has to do the work, and if the middle class, white women are no longer expected to do the “groundwork” jobs, then who is? In the words of Rittell and Webber in *Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning*, “Social problems are never solved. At best they are only re-solved—over and over again” (1973, p.160).

Social justice movements have been responsible for creating all of the major changes we have seen in recent history, from the suffragettes, to the women’s liberation movement in the 60s and 70s, to present day. Craftivism is a relatively new movement which combines (usually traditionally feminine) craft techniques with social justice to make a statement in a way that is inclusive and accessible to the general public. Grassroots projects such as “yarn bombing” whereby crochet is added to public structures such as railings, letterboxes and lamp posts, is deceptively subversive, with the seemingly harmless and feminocentric aesthetic combined with rebellious themes similar to that of graffiti (but more widely tolerated) providing “an alternative to more demonstrative forms of protest” (Jacks, 2020).



**Fig. 2**

In 2016, around the time of Donald Trump's inauguration, Krista Suh attended the Washington women's march wearing a hand knitted bright pink beanie hat with two cat ears (as seen in Figure 2) which she dubbed a "Pussy hat" – as explained on Pussyhat.com: "The name Pussyhat™ was chosen in part as a protest against vulgar comments Donald Trump made about the freedom he felt to grab women's genitals, to de-stigmatize the word "pussy" and transform it into one of empowerment". The pattern for knitting this hat was made public as an act of craftivism, and soon vast crowds of them could be seen at every women's march as a feminist symbol of power and celebration. These guerrilla style mass craftivism projects are a way of making a loud statement in a peaceful and non-threatening way, however, there are also more subtle forms of "craftivism" artists use to challenge ideas. Embedding stories, meanings and themes into artworks is not a new concept, but from post-modernism (Buchanan, 2008) onwards, artists have been challenging societal norms through means of craft, fine art and installation art. Tracey Emin's "Everyone I Have Ever Slept With" is a good example of this, making at-the-time-controversial statements about feminism, female sexuality and platonic relationships and challenging perceptions of what could be classed as a work of art. An artwork or project can have lots of different elements and messages that combine to create a larger, metaphorical picture.

Art gives us a platform to highlight issues in a way that perhaps the audience has not thought of, or such that the person's opinion is changed, therefore collectively changing opinions. My own art is currently focusing on textile crafts such as smocking, pleating, embroidery and gathering. These fabric manipulation techniques, often dismissed as low art or handicrafts (Jacks, 2020), have an ingenious intricacy, and I am fascinated by the way strong structures and folded forms can be fashioned out of the humble piece of cloth. The under representation of female artists is a problem that is only now beginning to be rectified (Gorrill, 2020, p.83) and textile art has often been undervalued and considered women's work (Nelson, Labat, Williams, p.328, 2005). Historically, women were not even allowed to be artists, so sewing projects were a way that women could express themselves. Because of this, I believe that using textiles in my design is the perfect medium to highlight the inequalities women still face today, and to showcase techniques that have been passed down through generations. The repetition of stitches and patterns to create a new whole could be used as a metaphor for the unseen daily labours and challenges undertaken by women. Embedding these kinds of metaphors, stories, and coded messages into my own artworks will be essential to starting new conversations and changing attitudes.

The outsourcing of “women’s work” in the form of textile labour from other countries is another issue that I can help mitigate within my work. My design values are heavily based around materiality, particularly focusing on textiles. For my samples I am currently using cheap mass produced fabrics that are likely made and prepared in countries like Bangladesh and China. Although I am not a fast fashion designer/company, as explored previously these materials still can have a detrimental effect on women working in textile factories abroad. Moving towards using ethically sourced fabrics approved by the Global Organic Textile standard (Global-standard.org, 2022) can help as this organisation has social initiatives aimed at providing living wages, appropriate working times and a safe working environment.

Realistically as a craftsperson, there are limits to what I can do to make a difference on this issue. However, in the eventuality that I might have employees, there are a number of ways I would propose to treat inequality problems in the workplace at a small scale level to “trickle up” to larger companies. I propose giving both female and male employees the right to parental paid leave, to share all workloads as they see fit for their circumstances, similar to the Swedish model (Fox, Pascal, Warren, 2009, p.316). Another scheme that would be beneficial is the 4 day working week, as trialled by 70 UK companies from June-December 2022 (4dayweek.co.uk, 2022). Giving the option to work 4 days for full time pay, in return for 100% productivity, along with general flexible work options such as working from home, could be beneficial to women in a number of ways. Fitting work around childcare and domestic duties for both men and women creates a more level playing field so that couples can share labour equally. I theorise that women also will be more likely to gain access to better paid, more rewarding jobs that can result in promotions, rather than being forced to work at lower socio-economic levels as a compromise for flexibility.

The issues with women’s work are immensely multi-faceted, but the implications of women doing less unpaid labour are that someone – likely men – will need to step up and share the load. We also need to mitigate the shifting of labour onto women from lower socioeconomic backgrounds and less developed countries in areas such as clothing and textiles. In addition to this, care related employment should be respected and wages should increase to reflect that. My hope is that the changing of attitudes and stereotypes through mediums such as craftivism and messages/storytelling will create freedom of choice for both women and men in regards to raising families, and lifetime earnings will gradually equalise. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but over time, gendered labour will change in a way that benefits all women in society.

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### **Fig.1**

Office for National Statistics (2016), *Average hours of unpaid work done per week for each category for men and women in 2015*, available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/earningsandworkinghours/articles/womenshouldtheresponsibilityofunpaidwork/2016-11-10> accessed on: 14/12/2022

### **Fig. 2**

Aleera, A. (2017) *Pussy Hat*, available at: <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/> accessed on: 14/12/2022