

Women and Super-Exploitation:

An Illustration Through Basic Marxist Economics

by *Stella B*

Maria is a 37 year old woman living in Winnipeg with her 2 children, Mario age 14 and Maricella age 12, and her husband Rey. Nine years ago Maria moved to Winnipeg as a domestic worker through the live-in caregiver program. For the first three years Maria worked for a professional couple caring for their young children, living in their basement and working long hours, suffering through loneliness and family separation. Over the course of the following four years Maria was able to obtain her permanent residency, to pick up extra evening work at Tim Horton's, rent an apartment in a shared house. After 7 years of separation, Maria was finally able to bring her children and her husband to live with her. Now, Rey works nights as a delivery driver and Maria continues to work as a nanny and a server at Tim Horton's.

From 7:00 am until 4:00 pm from Monday to Friday Maria works as a nanny for a middle-class professional family who have three children ages one, four, and seven years old. It is Maria's job to get the three children out of bed in the mornings, to dress them, and prepare their breakfast and pack a lunch for oldest child. Maria walks the older child to class, drops the middle child at pre-school, and takes the baby to the park or the library. Maria then picks the middle child up from pre-school, prepares lunch for the smaller children, and puts them down for nap. During nap Maria does laundry and tidies the house. After nap, she takes the two small ones to school to pick up the older child, bringing them all home again for snack. While the children have their snack, Maria starts dinner preparations based on the recipes her employers have left her, and ensures that everything is ready for when her employers arrive home between 4:00 and 4:30.



This type of domestic and caregiving work is called **reproductive labour**. It is the work that is mostly done by women in individual households within the family, or within the community. When women do this work for free for their families and communities, it is considered to have no value in the market economy, since no products or services are bought and sold. In this type of **interpersonal relation** only **use-values** are produced, food for the family to consume and domestic chores that ensure the ability of the family to function, such as shopping, laundry, and caring for children. Reproductive labour becomes **commodified** when middle and upper class families can afford to pay a domestic worker or a nanny to do this work in exchange for a wage or in slave-like conditions such as those required by the live-in caregiver program, or can pay the high daycare fees to send their children to a licenced daycare centre or family-run daycare. When reproductive labour is commodified it is considered unskilled and the workers are paid very low wages.



From 5:00 – 9:00 pm Maria then goes to her evening shift at Tim Horton's where she earns minimum wage preparing sandwiches and pouring coffees. Maria works alongside other working class folks in a process of **social production**, meaning that working class folk work together making products which are then sold for profits by the owners of the company. Under the capitalist **mode of production**, the two major classes, the working class and the bourgeoisie, engage in **social relations**; capitalists

own the **means of production** and hire workers to produce **commodities** for exchange or sale. The workers are **exploited** in that they earn far less than what the **exchange value** of the commodities they produce is really worth. The working class has no way of making money except to sell their labour power for wages. Exploitation is robbery of the working class on an individual and on a grand scale, as surplus value (profit margin) is added to all commodities produced by the working class, and the bourgeoisie just outright takes this profit margin without having to do any of the actual work!

Workers are paid a wage which is barely sufficient to meet their basic needs in a capitalist society. **Constant capital** is the term used to describe the physical things that are needed to produce commodities. Physical things are called constant capital because they remain at their original value until transformed by workers into commodities. At Tim Horton's this would include coffee beans, flour, sugar, ovens, coffee urns, etc.; they don't increase in value until made into things to sell for profits. **Variable capital** refers to the wages paid to workers, and it called variable because this is where capital adds new value; it is Maria's labour that turns coffee beans into coffee, which is sold for a profit – the actual cost of making the coffee is far less than the price that the consumer pays because **surplus value** is added to make up the **exchange value**. Maria and her co-workers at Tim Horton's are exploited when they are forced to sell their labour power for a wage which is a pittance compared to the profits pocketed by those who own the company.



Maria's family back home was pushed off their traditional lands as mining companies stole indigenous lands and displaced people. Maria's family moved into the city to find work as labourers. Unable to sustain their family, Maria sought work abroad in order to send money back to her family. Now in Canada, Maria remains an exploited worker, sending what money she can back home to her parents and siblings. In Canada, Maria and her co-workers are forced to live under **social relations of exploitation**; their lives are structured

around being subject to the control of the bourgeoisie.

When Maria gets home from her very long day at two jobs, her work is not done! Maria has her own children to care for, and a husband who must work nights. This means that after working all day for minimum wage, Maria comes home and works in her home for free. She prepares meals, washes clothes, helps her children with their homework, and does her best to provide a loving environment despite the many challenges her family faces. This type of work is considered to have no value for capitalists, despite the fact that it is women like Maria who provide the *most* profits for capitalists, migrating as a cheap and deskilled labour force, working long hours for minimum wage, and working for free at home raising a new generation of workers. Maria's story is a typical illustration of **super-exploitation**.

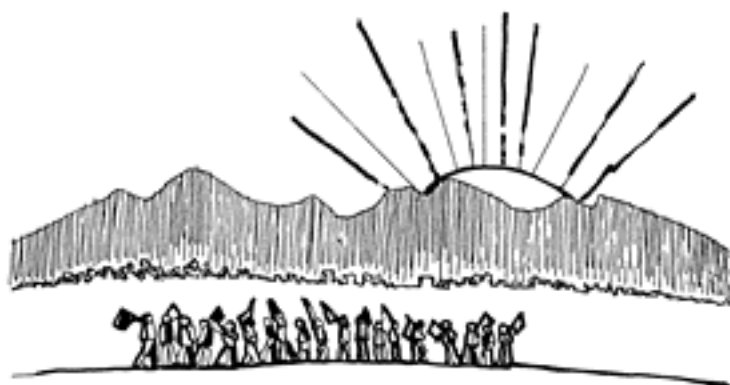


But who cares for Maria? How does capitalism repay her for her endless efforts and sacrifices? Maria is able to access a few state-run programs and services to help her family get by, such as the child tax benefit which gives Maria and Rey an extra \$236/month, and the community centre afterschool program where Maria's children can do their homework and play games with other kids while Rey sleeps before going to work. But overall Maria's relationship to the state and ideological **superstructure** is oppressive. The government and state structures in the imperialist countries are infused with structural racism and patriarchal ideology, from initial colonial contact to today.



State-run temporary foreign worker programs import cheap labour from Third World countries under strict and oppressive conditions. Legal structures of citizenship and immigration are designed to help those who have capital, wealth, and privilege; the gates of immigration open for the bourgeoisie and shut for the working class. Access to financial institutions for loans and mortgages increases as wealth and privilege increase; the poor are

stuck in shoddy rental housing without security. The dominant culture and ideology of society is that of the ruling classes and their legal, media, professional and academic allies. The exploitation of the working class and the super exploitation of working class women are structural and can only be overcome by revolution and social transformation!



A Glossary of Terms

Base: Economic structure of society equated with the mode of production.

Mode of production: The totality of the *forces* and the *relations of production*. The mode of production is the economic base of society “which determines the general character of the social, political, and spiritual (ideological) processes of life” (Marx). Marx stated that ... “history exists as a succession of modes of production” from primitive communism to feudalism, to capitalism, and through class struggle, finally to communism.

Forces of production: Consist of all of the elements necessary to generate wealth in society; under the capitalist mode of production, the forces of production are what are necessary to produce profits (or surplus value):

a. Labour Power: the working class who must sell their labour power to survive

b. Means of Production: capital assets, machinery, tools, factories, land, etc.

Relations of production: Relations of production are “the way people are formally and informally associated within the economic sphere of production, including as *social classes*” (Wikipedia). Under capitalism the relations of production refers to the relationship between the bourgeoisie who own the means of production and the workers who must sell their labour power.

Marx defined two forms of the social relations of production:

1. **Relations of exploitation:** a) slavery, b) servitude, and c) capitalist relationships; this is a very important point! **Exploitation is a relationship!** Where workers are exploited, the bourgeoisie prosper!
2. **Relations of reciprocal collaboration:** relationships developing under socialism and realized under the communist mode of production characterized by the lack of domination and exploitation.

Social production: refers to production of commodities by *labour power*, which is social production in that it requires the working class sell their labour and produce commodities for the capitalists to get rich. Social production is very different from the type of individual reproductive labour that happens in individual homes and for free in the community.

Commodities: socially produced for the purpose of exchange for other commodities or for money, and as such have an ‘exchange value’; as opposed to goods, which are produced for personal consumption and have only use value.

Exchange value: represents the economic value of a commodity realized through trade, either for other commodities or for money (price). Exchange value (or price) includes the total cost of production of the commodity plus an added surplus; it is through the exchange of commodities that capitalists gain the surplus value as profits. Exchange value can also take the form of building more capital to produce more commodities – therefore exchange of commodities on the market expands future capital and hence capitalism's drive to ever expand markets and exchange (sell) more and more commodities.

Abstract labour power: the sum total of previous social labour power contained within a commodity for exchange.

Exploitation: The difference between the amount of wealth created by the labour of the working class and the amount returned to them in the form of wages. All workers are exploited to some degree, some far more than others (see super-exploitation). Capitalism divides people into classes, and exploitation results from the unequal social relations of exploitation between the bourgeoisie and the working class. The more workers are exploited, the more profits for the capitalists!

Variable capital: the cost of paying workers, i.e. wages. What is a 'fair wage' or a 'living wage' under capitalism? The whole idea that capitalists can live off of the sweat and blood of the working class is injustice.

Constant capital: the physical things needed for workers to produce commodities, including capital assets, land, raw materials, machines, tools, etc.

Surplus value: an additional sum of money added to the exchange value so that the capitalists earn profits. I.e. if it costs \$2.00 of materials and \$0.50 in wages to build a cell phone in a factory, and the factory owner gets \$10 for each phone from the phone company, then the owner of that factory has a \$7.50 surplus on each phone, which is more than the total cost of both the materials and the wages paid to the worker!

Use value: the non-economic value of goods; use-value refers to the aspect of goods that are useful for people, as opposed to profitable for capitalists. Goods that are produced for personal consumption and have no exchange value within the capitalist market *only* have use-value for people and no economic value for capitalism.

Interpersonal relations and production of use values: Interpersonal relations are intra-class relationships, usually between family or community members, where only use values are produced.

Super-exploitation: The concept of super-exploitation is a useful one to clarify that not all workers are exploited at the same rate. The super-exploitation of women occurs because women are exploited as workers within production, and in addition experience *concealed* exploitation in that we produce necessary goods and services for *free* (use-values). Super-exploitation isn't *just* a rate of exploitation over and above the usual rate; super-exploitation occurs because a sizeable portion of women's labour is not considered by capitalism to have any value at all (use-values), is not

compensated in the form of wages, and is therefore concealed and not recognized as exploitation despite the fact that capitalism could not function without it.

Both national oppression and patriarchy work within capitalism to force groups of people into working for low wages or in slave-like conditions. As the Program Demand Group¹ describes it: “exploitation takes the form of oppression of whole countries and the super-exploitation of colonial and female labor in an internationalization of a shadow economy comprised of cheap labor, slave labor, and “free” labor.

Superstructure: The state (politics), the institutions that determine the structure of our society (organization), and popular social consciousness (ideology). The superstructure is “the social organization evolving directly out of production and commerce, which in all ages forms the basis of the state and of the rest of the idealistic superstructure” (Marx & Engels); “The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life processes in general” (Marx).

i The Program Demand Group. (2002). Toward a Program of Resistance. Available for download here: http://www.ahorano.org/pdg_cover.html