

Household Production, Gender Inequality and the Movement Control Order

VIEWS 32/20 | 22 April 2020 | Christopher Choong Weng Wai

Views are short opinion pieces by the author(s) to encourage the exchange of ideas on current issues. They may not necessarily represent the official views of KRI. All errors remain the author's own.

This view was prepared by Christopher Choong Weng Wai, a researcher from the Khazanah Research Institute (KRI). The author is grateful for the valuable comments from Nazihah Muhamad Noor. Cover photo is by Nur Alya Zahirah Hazril Faeiz.

This article was first published on Malay Mail under the same title on 21 April 2020.

Author's email address:
christopher.choong@krinstitute.org

Attribution – Please cite the work as follows:
Christopher Choong Weng Wai. 2020.
Household Production, Gender Inequality
and the Movement Control Order. Kuala
Lumpur: Khazanah Research Institute.
License: Creative Commons Attribution CC
BY 3.0.

Translations – If you create a translation of this work, please add the following disclaimer along with the attribution: This translation was not created by Khazanah Research Institute and should not be considered an official Khazanah Research Institute translation. Khazanah Research Institute shall not be liable for any content or error in this translation.

Information on Khazanah Research Institute publications and digital products can be found at www.KRIInstitute.org.



Giving visibility to household production

At the end of the Movement Control Order (MCO) on 28th April, most of us in Malaysia would have spent the bulk of our time at home for a total of 42 days. For the post-World War 2 and post-1969 generations, this would probably be our first time experiencing something that resembles a curfew—but tempered with its own peculiarities and distinctions. We could still go out, within limits, but our conventional spaces of production and exchange are largely closed, and we have access only to a narrow set of goods and services deemed as essential in our customary marketplace.

When market production effectively shuts down, household production—or housework, becomes more visible. Value is still being produced, at home, just not exchanged and transacted, hence not captured in the most hallowed, but woefully inadequate, of all economic measurements, the GDP (gross domestic product). But household production is valuable nonetheless, most of

the time unpaid, without a price, and it was these goods and services, produced at home, that have seen us through thus far, preserving us as a society and upholding our pandemic-battered economy.

However, for people who have always been involved in household production, majority of them being women, it is almost a platitude to say that household production is the backbone of our economy, without which market production couldn't take place. Yet, the significance of household production for our larger functioning as a society is seldom and incommensurably articulated, and worse, not built systematically into our broader policy-making architecture.

Therefore, as we approach the finale of this phase of the MCO, it is only apt that we take a moment to pause, and reflect on household production, offer a tribute to how it has supported us throughout this momentous episode in our nation's history as well as commit ourselves to fighting remaining inequalities in this sphere. Covid-19 and the MCO have provoked a rethinking of our fundamental assumptions about society and the economy, and one indispensable piece in this is our collective ability to reimagine a new economy to include household production in the post-pandemic world.

In this respect, amplified perhaps by my own experience and reflections of the MCO, I would like to offer three aspects of inequality in household production for us to think about.

1. Undercounting domestic and unpaid care work
2. Gender stratification in household production
3. Lack of labour rights for foreign domestic workers

Undercounting domestic and unpaid care work

We can think of household production in terms of domestic work and unpaid care work. Domestic work includes more indirect provisions of care e.g. cooking, laundry, cleaning, grocery shopping, while unpaid care work involves closer interactions between providers and beneficiaries e.g. reading to a child and giving medicine to the sick. We can broadly classify the 'outputs' from household production into six categories i.e. housing (e.g. cleaning and maintaining of dwelling), nutrition (e.g. food preparations); clothing (e.g. laundry, folding clothes); care (e.g. reading to a child), volunteer work (e.g. community work) and transport (e.g. bringing a child to school in a car).

Since the onset of the MCO, a sizeable chunk of these activities has shifted from the market to the household. Parents who used to outsource care and education of their children to childcare centres and schools would now have to assume these responsibilities at home, workers who used to send their clothes to the laundrette would now have to wash their own clothes, and so on. At the same time, it's as much about intensifying existing household production as shifting market activities to the household. For example, a homemaker who used to cook at home and clean the house would have to do these activities more frequently given the amount of time household members spent at home during the MCO.

Given the nature of household production, which oftentimes involves producing goods and services amongst family members, it is difficult to expect pecuniary remuneration for these activities. Some would even argue vehemently against the commodification of what should be

borne out of the benevolence of our hearts. If so, how can we value domestic and unpaid care work?

In Khazanah Research Institute's report 'Time to Care: Gender Inequality, Unpaid Care Work and Time Use Survey', we have argued that the first step in recognising domestic and unpaid care work is to count them. If we can't count them in monetary terms, we count them using time; the minutes, hours, days, weeks, months that households have laboriously spent on cooking, caring, cleaning, volunteering and so on. The time use survey methodology used to do this is consistent with the principles and practices of the international community. Our own pilot study shows that household production contributes around 31-34% of household income for our small sample collected in Kuala Lumpur.

But why is it important to put a time and money value to household production? Is this yet another example of our obsession to quantify and put a number to everything? I would argue otherwise, but only within the remit of recognising the limitations of any quantitative methods and their appropriateness for different purposes and contexts.

In this case, beyond giving statistical visibility to household production, it helps us to assess more fully the trade-offs confronting households in choosing between household and market production. The obvious example here is our policy push to increase female labour force participation rate—will we overestimate social welfare improvement when women join the workforce if we do not also account for the loss of value from household production? It has implications for how we think about what wages and working conditions constitute as decent for women in the marketplace, and the type and magnitude of family benefits that the government needs to provide for a more rounded economic empowerment agenda for women.

Ideally, in the not-so-long run, we can have a national time use survey incorporated in our statistical apparatus. But more immediately, we can incorporate a question to understand the increase in time spent on household production in the surveys that the Department of Statistics has currently rolled out in light of the pandemic. This can be the first step in that journey of a thousand miles to count and recognise domestic and unpaid care work, especially given its current role in buttressing us from the worst effects of the pandemic.

Gender stratification in household production

There is some extent of 'path dependence' when it comes to household production. Our decisions on 'who to do what' within a household during the MCO are often circumscribed by how we have organised household production before the MCO. If the wife has been the one cooking before the MCO, it is unlikely that the husband would take over the role, at least not in a major way, during the MCO. In other words, gender roles do not suddenly dissipate just because of the MCO.

Based on our report cited earlier, we find that women tend to do more of the routine, inflexible and mundane tasks, while men tend to do the opposite. For example, men would be the ones managing household finances, playing with their children, doing groceries for families and transporting children to schools, while women would be the ones cleaning, cooking, bathing, doing laundry and feeding their children.

The differentiation in task allocation means that the MCO would impact men and women quite differently when it comes to household production. Men would have less transporting to do during the MCO and would even find grocery shopping a form of pleasurable escapism from the confines of the house. As for women, their tasks have become more frequent and more intense—more meals to cook, more dishes to wash, more clothes to fold, more children's schoolwork to monitor, etc.

Compounded with the mental burden of having to plan and manage household production, from educating clueless husbands on the difference between a spring onion and a leek (it's a hyperbole, but you get the point) to setting time schedules for restless children loaded with pent-up energy, it can be reasonably assumed that the already disproportionate burden borne by women has only heightened with the MCO. For women who have to work from home, the confluence of simultaneous work, mental labour and routine tasks only adds to the drudgery, double burden and lived disparities experienced.

Again, our report has found evidence for all these in the pre-pandemic world, with differentiated impact for women from different income classes and life-cycle stages. Perhaps, the aberration here with the MCO is that this gender stratification is now experienced alongside a rupture to our time rhythms and patterns, which have previously played such a pivotal role in setting measured tempo and cadence to regulate our daily lives, but now fused, spatially and temporally, into a tangled and discordant set of activities.

Lack of labour rights for foreign domestic workers

The notion that work and life are now fused brings me to the realities of foreign domestic workers in Malaysia, especially pertaining to their lived-in arrangements with their employers. Conceivably, the silver lining in our difficulties in disentangling work and life during the MCO is that they are short-term, impermanent and are bound to return to normal at some foreseeable point in the near future, however imperfect that may be.

However, for foreign domestic workers, this blend of work and life is anything but short-term and transitory. It has existed before the MCO, continues during the MCO and will persist after the MCO. Laden with debt, paid miserly, and in all likelihood, permeated with worry for the health of their family members back home, coupled with a sense of guilt for perceivably abandoning them at this time, there is no normalcy to look forward to, other than the eventual return to more impoverished conditions and potentially conflict-ridden countries.

While foreign domestic workers are classified as employees in the Employment Act 1955, they are not afforded the protection given to the other categories of workers. Other than the termination of contract, they are excluded from the provisions on rest days, hours of work and holidays, as well as categorically excluded from minimum wage legislation. Their fate always depends on the generosity of their employers, and at times, the bilateral negotiations between their respective embassies and the government.

The intersectionality between gender and citizenship is also important here. Based on 2017 data, more than 99% of foreign domestic workers in Malaysia are women. With heightened household production and enhanced gender stratification during the MCO, the additional layer of having to

don the 'foreign domestic servant' label perhaps only add to women's vulnerability, inequality and precariousness during this period.

Now that we all have experienced, in various degrees, the torment of not being able to distinguish work and leisure, can we not empathise with foreign domestic workers who have to live with this working arrangement in perpetuity? Can we not extend them the same rights as we've done for the other workers? Perhaps, and just perhaps, a good place to start, is to question the requirement that foreign domestic workers have to live in with their employers, followed by the rethinking of alternative arrangements for decent housing and living.

A concluding tribute

When markets reopen and production resumes, household production would once again fade silently into the realm of the invisible. But household production will continue despite being uncounted, disproportionate and precarious. To paraphrase Caroline Criado-Perez, if the alternative is 'children not being cared for and the housework not getting done', there is really not that much of a choice to begin with. Milan Kundera wrote, 'The struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting'. This, then, is an attempt to throw a spanner in the works of forgetting, to slow the proverbial memory curve from flattening too soon.

I would like to end by paying tribute to 'frontline workers' in household production, conveying a high-order 'thank you' to all of you for providing care, nourishing society and keeping our homes sane despite the tumultuousness and deep uncertainties out there. Domestic workers and unpaid care workers, women and men, citizens and non-citizens, *terima kasih* (accept my love) for sustaining us throughout this period and making everything seems more bearable. As the feminist economist, Nancy Folbre said, 'Work can be very productive and create value for society even if it's unpaid.' This has always been true and cannot be any truer now than ever before.

Bibliography

Khazanah Research Institute. 2019. Time to Care: Gender Inequality, Unpaid Care Work and Time Use Survey. Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Research Institute.

Ministry of Home Affairs. 2018. 'Jumlah Pekerja Asing (PLKS Aktif) Mengikut Jantina Dan Negara Sumber'. Ministry of Home Affairs Malaysia.
http://www.data.gov.my/data/ms_MY/dataset/jumlah-pekerja-asing-plks-aktif-mengikutjantina-dan-negara-sumber