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REFRAMING WOMEN'S LIFE AND LABOUR: A CRITICAL INQUIRY INTO FERDYNAND ZWEIG'S 1952 PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER, WORK, AND FAMILY IN POST-WAR BRITAIN

This article revisits Ferdynand Zweig's Women's Life and Labour (1952), illuminating the paradoxes of women's position between paid employment and unpaid caregiving, and establishing it as a key historical document of post-war Britain. Written during a period of reconstruction, Zweig's study captures the indispensable nature of women's labour as well as the cultural pressures that sought to confine it to the domestic sphere. His descriptive analysis reveals the contradictions of a society that relied on women's economic contribution yet denied its full recognition. The article shows that, despite being rooted in the immediate post-war context, Zweig's work continues to influence debates on gender, work, and social policy. By highlighting the structural invisibility of domestic labour, the enduring wage disparities, and the limitations of welfare provisions, Zweig's observations remain strikingly relevant for understanding persistent inequalities. However, the analysis also shows that, shaped by the assumptions of his era, his conclusions require critical revaluation in light of later policy reforms and shifting gender norms. Reconsidering Women's Life and Labour today highlights the importance of historical perspectives for contemporary debates: Zweig's account not only provides a portrait of mid-twentieth-century Britain but also lays the groundwork for examining how institutional legacies continue to shape women's opportunities in work and family life.

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In *Women's Life and Labour* (1952), Ferdynand Zweig presents a detailed examination of women's roles in post-war Britain, with a particular focus on their dual responsibilities they carried within both family and work settings. Written during a period of significant social restructuring following the Second World War, Zweig's work captures the challenges and limitations that women faced when navigating the tension between traditional domestic expectations and their wartime labour contributions. The post-war era saw a renewed emphasis on domesticity, with numerous societal and governmental initiatives encouraging women to return to the home. Zweig's analysis reveals the conflict between these opposing pressures, reflecting both the persistence of traditional gender norms alongside the shifting socio-economic realities of post-war Britain. His observations provide critical insight into how women's labour — both unpaid domestic work and paid employment — was consistently undervalued and structurally constrained, shaping not only family life, but also the wider economic order. As Zweig noted, 'the housewife's contribution, though indispensable, is neither counted in wages nor acknowledged in economic statistics' (Zweig 1952: 39), a remark that highlights how the invisibility of domestic labour reinforced broader patterns of inequality.

This article addresses the following research question: How does Zweig's portrayal of women's roles in post-war Britain highlight both the structural constraints and potential avenues for gender equality within the realms of family life and the labour market? Through a critical analysis of Zweig's perspective, this study examines the socio-economic implications of women's dual roles, evaluating the extent to which Zweig's work aligns with or diverges from later feminist theories, labour economics perspectives, and historical interpretations of gendered labour. Situating Zweig's work within these broader frameworks aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of how mid- twentieth-century gender norms shaped and limited women's opportunities.

Revisiting Ferdynand Zweig's *Women's Life and Labour* is not a matter of antiquarian interest but an analytical necessity. Located within what Peter Hennessy famously called the 'post-war consensus',— 'a cradle to grave welfare state buttressed by a commitment to full employment' (Hennessy 1992: 14) — Zweig provides an empirically grounded account of women's work that was, in his own words, 'too readily dismissed as pin-money' and redirected towards

a state-sponsored programme of 're-domestication' (Zweig 1952: 38, 41). This historical benchmark enables the rigorous appraisal of contemporary policy instruments such as statutory parental leave, flexible-working regulations and care-credit schemes. By exposing how the consensus-era settlement simultaneously 'thirsted for female labour' whilst reinscribing the housewife ideal, the present analysis provides the diachronic context necessary for current investigations into gender pay gaps, the 'care penalty,' and the ongoing imbalance of unpaid work. Zweig's mid-century insights thus provide British social-policy researchers with a precise lens through which to interrogate the extent to which inherited institutional architectures continue to facilitate or impede substantive gender parity in twenty-first-century labour markets.

Zweig's observations also resonate within a broader historical and intellectual tradition. In *The Age of Extremes* (1994), Eric Hobsbawm provides a broad historical overview of the social and economic transformations that redefined gender roles in the aftermath of the Second World War. Hobsbawm notes that women's entry into the wartime labour force disrupted traditional gender norms; however, post-war social policies and cultural attitudes soon reasserted pre-war ideals — positioning women within the domestic sphere once again. This shift mirrors the process of 're-domestication' that Zweig critiques. Similarly, in *Housewife* (1974: 67–72), Ann Oakley challenges the assumption that domestic labour is an inherent to women's identity, instead framing it as a socially constructed and economically marginalised form of work. Her analysis provides a critical perspective on Zweig's portrayal of women as both caregivers and economic contributors, highlighting how traditional roles were reinforced by their exclusion from formal economic recognition.

Finally, foundational feminist critiques broaden the theoretical framework through which Zweig's work can be reconsidered. Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) and Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* (1949/2010) famously dismantle the myth of innate female domesticity, framing gender instead as a product of cultural construction and ideological reinforcement. Along with the works of Oakley and Hobsbawm, these texts provide the necessary theoretical and historical scaffolding for positioning Zweig's mid-century study within a broader critical discourse. In doing so, they enable us to read *Women's Life and Labour* not only as a record of gendered constraints, but also as a means of interrogating the durability of such constraints within contemporary labour markets and policy frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

This study is based upon a concise yet comprehensive conceptual framework that brings together the ideas of seven theorists operating across three analytical levels: micro (daily practice), meso (institutional rules), and macro (political economy). These lenses are mapped directly onto the empirical basis

of time-use diaries, ministry files, and factory interviews. This deliberately integrated design ensures that each theoretical concept is firmly rooted in historical material, preventing any evidence floating free from interpretation.

Feminist Thinkers: Gender, Performance, and Intersectionality

The first layer of analysis is framed by four theorists from the feminist canon. Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity challenges Zweig's concept of the 'housewife' by treating it not as an innate identity, but as a socially rehearsed script (Butler 1990: 33–34). However, Butler's focus on how gender norms are reiterated in everyday gestures can obscure the material constraints, such as rationing and housing shortages that limited women's choices in 1940s Britain. To address this, the analysis turns to Nancy Fraser, who critiques the 'invisibility' of household labour. She recasts Zweig's seemingly private scenes as sites of value extraction that are essential to the reproduction of labour power (Fraser 2013: 55–60). Barbara Ehrenreich and Arlie Russell Hochschild extend this insight across to global care chains, illustrating how the dependencies Zweig described persist, albeit in an altered form, under late-twentieth-century globalisation (Ehrenreich, Hochschild 2003: 5–7). Although their analysis is not based on Zweig's archives, it functions as a temporal epilogue, highlighting the enduring nature of care inequalities. Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality framework completes this feminist analysis. By highlighting the intersection of gender with race and class, Crenshaw ensures that the faint traces of Black and migrant women in the archive are not absorbed into a universal narrative (Crenshaw 1989: 140–45).

Economic and Institutional Logics

To explain why gender divisions endured despite economic changes, the framework adopts three perspectives from labour economics and social theory. Gary Becker's neo-classical theory of household 'efficiency' reflects the post-war notion that women's wages were supplementary 'pin-money' rather than essential income (Becker 1981: 23–27). Contrasting this with Butler's account of performativity reveals how cultural norms and economic reasoning reinforced each other to normalise gender-based specialisation. Sylvia Walby's concept of patriarchal capitalism bridges the gap between household routines and labour-market structures. Her six 'arenas of patriarchy' provide a meso-level cartography against which institutional mechanisms, such as Britain's married-woman's tax allowance or part-time employment patterns, can be critically assessed (Walby 1990: 98–105). Amartya Sen's capability approach adds a normative dimension by foregrounding agency. Zweig's descriptive sketches thus become indicators of constrained freedom (Sen 1999: 72–76). However, this individual-level lens risks overlooking the collective exclusions that women faced. To address this issue, the analysis draws on labour history, especially the male-only rules of trade unions, in order to highlight the structural barriers Sen's model might overlook.

Interplay and Synthesis

When Judith Butler's notion of performativity is considered alongside Gary Becker's model of household efficiency, two strikingly different interpretations of housework emerge. For Butler, daily routines such as cooking or cleaning are not neutral tasks but rather compelled performances that continually reproduce gender norms. By contrast, Becker treats these activities as rational economic behaviour within the family, presenting them as the most 'efficient' way to allocate resources. This juxtaposition shows how cultural expectations and economic reasoning reinforce each other, thereby normalising the domestic role of women.

Sylvia Walby's concept of patriarchal capitalism then connects these interpretations to broader institutional structures. Tax policy, job segregation, and family allowances perpetuate the very systems described by Butler and Becker, embedding gender divisions not only in culture and household choices, but also in the rules of the labour market itself. Amartya Sen's capability approach adds yet another dimension by asking whether women had genuine freedom of choice, or whether structural barriers curtailed their agency. Together, these perspectives explain the persistence of gender divisions in post-war Britain: these divisions were enacted in daily life, sanctioned by institutional rules, and profitable to the economic order that relied on them. At the same time, however, this framework acknowledges its own limitations. Post-colonial and queer-of-colour scholarship is largely absent, pointing to essential directions for future research into the intersection of race, migration, sexuality, and class with women's labour.

From Theory to History: A Dynamic Cycle

In order to operationalise the theoretical framework, the study proposes a dynamic cycle that unfolds across three interconnected stages. This model allows us to trace the interaction between structural pressures, lived experiences, and embodied practices in sustaining — and sometimes challenging — gendered divisions of labour in post-war Britain. The first stage, structural contradiction, emerged in the immediate aftermath of 1945. British industry was 'thirsting for labour', yet state policy and wage structures relegated women's earnings to the status of 'pin-money.' Marx described this type of contradiction as an 'internal limit' to capital accumulation (Marx 1867/1990: 783). Rather than resolving this tension, state interventions such as the 1948 Family Allowances Act exacerbated it by subsidising care without addressing pay inequality; this policy entrenched women's secondary economic status. As E. P. Thompson notes, such contradictions remain dormant 'until they are fought out' (Thompson 1963: 9).

The second stage, experiential mobilisation, unfolded in everyday life. Fragments of discontent emerged through canteen gossip, letters to the *Daily Mirror,* and discussions in local union branches. These seemingly mundane exchanges gradually converged into what Raymond Williams called a 'structure of feeling' —

an inchoate but shared awareness of exploitation that existed before it could be fully articulated in political or ideological language (Williams 1977: 132). The third stage, dispositional recalibration, occurs both on and through the body. Each time a woman clocked in at six, lodged a grievance at the union office, and then prepared the evening meal, she rehearsed a hybrid form of agency. This embodied routine produced what Bourdieu termed a habitus — a durable, historically sedimented way of acting. However, this was not a single, unified disposition: drawing on Bernard Lahire's work, we recognise that women constantly shifted between contradictory normative frameworks, combining punctuality and assertiveness with thrift and care (Bourdieu 1984: 170; Lahire 2011: 18).

The 1968 Ford Dagenham strike offers a telling epilogue. Although it is outside the chronological and archival scope of Zweig's study, the strike exemplifies the cumulative force of this dynamic cycle, with structural contradictions, lived experiences, and embodied adaptations converging into collective political mobilisation. The subsequent *Equal Pay Act* of 1970 was a formal response to these demands, but its impact was limited. Employers reclassified job roles to avoid compliance, thus effectively restarting the cycle of inequality and resistance. This recurrence confirmed Marx and Engels's observation that capitalism is defined by 'ever-lasting uncertainty and agitation' (Marx, Engels 1848/1976: 486).

From Contradiction to Mobilisation

This integrated framework demonstrates the close link between everyday performances of femininity and economic structures that benefit from gendered labour divisions. Rather than assuming the naturalness of their roles, it explains their endurance by revealing how they are lived, institutionalised, and made profitable. While the framework has its limits, notably its underrepresentation of postcolonial and queer perspectives, it provides a robust basis for the subsequent historical analysis, facilitating ongoing dialogue between theory and evidence.

Post-war Scholarship on Gender Roles and Inequalities

Historical Gender Roles

Scholarly accounts of women's roles in post-war Britain both confirm and extend Zweig's insights, but also reframe them in important ways. For example, Stephanie Spencer (2005: 41–55) shows how gendered expectations were embedded early on through educational and workplace norms, thereby limiting women's autonomy even before they entered the labour market. Ruth Milkman (1987: 102–108) shows how the wartime expansion of women into male-dominated industries, which could have undermined traditional divisions, was deliberately reversed after the war, thus reinforcing occupational segregation. Penny Summerfield (1989: 83–90) adds that this reversal generated cultural tension: while women's proven competence was acknowledged, they were simultaneously

pressured to return to domestic roles. Taken together, these works reveal that the 're-domestication' Zweig observed was not only real, but also systematically produced through institutions, policies, and cultural narratives. What Zweig identified as a social tendency is, in light of subsequent research, revealed to be a coordinated reassertion of structural gender inequality — one that continues to shape contemporary debates about labour and family roles.

Gender Pay and Labour Inequity

Zweig's observation that women's earnings were frequently dismissed as 'pin-money' pre-empted one of the most enduring debates in labour economics: the systematic undervaluation of women's work. Blau and Kahn's classic analysis (2000: 75–82), demonstrates how occupational segregation and discriminatory practices have sustained a persistent gender wage gap, preventing women from achieving full financial independence. Claudia Goldin's Career and Family (2021: 115–120) extends this perspective to the twentieth century, showing that, even as educational and professional opportunities expanded, the tension between career advancement and family responsibilities reproduced inequality in more subtle but equally powerful ways. Ann Orloff (1994: 52–58) contextualises these disparities within the framework of the welfare state, arguing that social policy simultaneously enabled women's employment while also reinforcing constraints by assuming their primary responsibility for caregiving. Together, these studies reveal that the relegation of women's wages to secondary status, which Zweig identified as a mid-century commonplace, was not a passing anomaly, but a structural feature of modern economies, sustained by both market logic and state institutions.

Gender and Family Responsibilities

The dual expectations that Zweig identified, namely that women should sustain both family life and paid employment, remain a central theme in gender studies. Arlie Russell Hochschild's The Second Shift (1989: 73–79) built on this idea, coining the term 'double burden' to describe the fact that women's working day rarely ends when they leave the office, as it continues with household and caregiving duties. Catherine Hakim's (2004: 52–57) broadens the picture by showing how these responsibilities affect long-term career choices in environments with limited structural support. Her analysis underscores how the lack of affordable childcare and flexible working arrangements forces many women into part-time or interrupted careers. Mary Daly and Katherine Rake (2003: 44–48), however, demonstrate that such outcomes are not inevitable: countries with robust family-support policies report significantly higher female labour participation rates. This points to the capacity of policy design to either entrench or alleviate the tensions Zweig described. Together, these studies show that Zweig's description of the personal struggle between home and work is better understood as a structural outcome of institutional arrangements that either reinforce or alleviate the 'second shift' experienced by women.

Modern Perspectives on Gendered Labour

Contemporary research makes clear that the dynamics identified by Zweig have not disappeared, but have taken on new forms. Michelle Budig and Paula England (2001: 206–211) quantify the 'wage penalty for motherhood': caregiving responsibilities reduce women's earning potential not only through lost hours, but also via discriminatory assumptions that mothers are less committed workers. Their findings transform Zweig's qualitative observations into measurable structural disadvantages. In their comparative study of welfare regimes, Daly and Rake (2003: 97–102) highlight the international variation in how these disadvantages are addressed. Some welfare systems exacerbate inequality by assuming women's dependence, while others redistribute caregiving in ways that expand women's economic agency through policies such as care credits or parental leave. These perspectives underline that the constraints Zweig documented in the 1950s remain highly relevant, albeit now within the context of globalised labour markets and policy debates concerning the valuation and distribution of care work.

Analysis

This section revisits Zweig's account of women's labour in post-war Britain, examining it across three domains: gendered roles, the economic invisibility of domestic labour, and the impact of social policy. Read alongside later feminist and sociological critiques, his text seems both prescient and limited: it is sharp in its empirical observations, yet hesitant in its theoretical scope.

Gendered Labour Roles

In *Women's Life and Labour*, Zweig describes women as being caught between paid employment and caregiving — a 'dual positioning,' that he presents as an inevitable part of female identity. While his framing captures the material strain of divided roles, it leaves the cultural logics that naturalised this division unquestioned. Subsequent feminist theory addresses what Zweig omits. Ann Oakley's (1974: 91–95) demonstrates that domestic labour is not merely overlooked by being excluded from productivity measures, reinforcing subordination. Judith Butler (1990: 33–34) takes this critique further by rejecting the idea of innate gender roles. For Butler, gender is performative — a set of reiterated norms rather than destiny. Viewed through this lens, Zweig's portrayal seems confined to descriptive realism, merely documenting the burdens faced by women without delving into the ideological mechanisms that made these burdens appear 'natural.'

Economic Value of Domestic Labour

Zweig acknowledges the indispensability of unpaid domestic labour, but does not analyse its structural invisibility. Gary Becker's *A Treatise* on the

Family (1981: 23–27) exhibits a similar limitation: his economic model portrays the division of labour in a household as 'efficient,' overlooking the underlying unequal power dynamics. Both approaches describe family arrangements, but neither offers a critique of their inequitable foundations. Later empirical research goes further. Budig and England (2001: 206–211) quantify the 'motherhood penalty,' demonstrating how childcare responsibilities reduce women's earnings and perpetuate long-term inequality. While Zweig provides a description, Budig and England reveal the systemic mechanisms of disadvantage, transforming anecdotal observations into evidence of structural harm.

Social Policy and Gender Roles

For Zweig, post-war welfare measures such as family allowances represented the duality of promise and constraint: while they stabilised households, they also reinforced conventional divisions. His account acknowledges this ambivalence, but aslo treats family structures as necessary pillars of stability rather than as contested sites of power. Later critiques shed light on the structural issues involved. In her essay *Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis* (1999: 18–22), Joan Scott insists that gender is constitutive, rather than incidental, of social order. From this perspective, Zweig's reliance on nuclear-family norms reads less like neutral reporting and more like a tacit acceptance of a framework that perpetuated inequality. Consequently, his text thereby illustrates a broader limitation of mid-century sociology: its ability to observe inequity without fully interrogating the institutional designs that perpetuate it.

Discussion

Although not a definitive account of women's place in society, Ferdynand Zweig's *Women's Life and Labour* retains significance as a historical marker of how post-war Britain sought to reconcile competing demands on women's lives. His portrayal of the 'dual role' offers a valuable insight into a period when gender norms were in flux yet still deeply entrenched. For contemporary readers, revisiting Zweig is less about recovering forgotten voices than tracing the origins of the ongoing debates surrounding work, care, and gender equality.

At the same time, Zweig's work reveals the limitations of mid-twentieth-century sociology. While his narrative captures women's struggles, it leaves the structural sources of inequality unexamined, thereby naturalising rather than questioning the gendered division of labour. Subsequent feminist scholarship has since revealed the systemic mechanisms that render women's labour invisible. This contrast underscores a key methodological point: gender cannot be analysed as a background condition, but must be considered a fundamental organising principle of both family and economic life.

Engaging with Zweig again today also clarifies our understanding of social policy. His cautious endorsement of family allowances and welfare reforms

illustrates how measures intended to stabilise society can also perpetuate inequalities if based on the assumption that women are the primary caregivers. The implication for current policy debates is clear: support systems must redistribute responsibilities and resources more equitably, rather than merely compensating women for their caregiving roles. Otherwise, policies risk perpetuating the very dynamics Zweig documented — providing short-term stability while creating long-term inequality.

Thus, Zweig's analysis has the enduring value that lies not in the solutions he offered, but in the questions his work leaves open. By contextualising his observations within broader debates, we can see how his text functions as both evidence of historical constraints and a reminder of how fragile progress towards gender equity can be. In terms of social policy, this means recognising that reforms are most effective when they challenge rather than reinforce inherited assumptions.

Conclusion

In *Women's Life and Labour* (1952), Ferdynand Zweig captures a defining paradox of post-war Britain: while women's labour was essential to the country's economic and social recovery, their contributions were persistently undervalued and confined to traditional family roles. His observations remain significant not because they fully explained these dynamics, but because they documented them with unusual clarity at a critical historical moment.

This present analysis shows that the tensions Zweig described, such as those between paid work and unpaid caregiving, and between recognition and invisibility, have not disappeared. Instead, they have re-emerged in altered forms, sustained by institutional arrangements and cultural expectations. Therefore, Zweig's work is not only a record of the 1950s but also a reminder of how easily systemic inequalities can be normalised as 'natural' divisions of labour.

In the context of contemporary social policy, this legacy highlights the importance of addressing care as a fundamental economic question rather than a private responsibility. Crucial sites where gendered inequalities are reproduced, and where meaningful reform can dismantle them, include policies on childcare, parental leave, equal pay, and pension provision. Finally, revisiting Zweig's study highlights the value of historical sociology in current debates: his work encourages us to consider which inherited frameworks continue to influence women's opportunities and how alternative systems could be developed. In this way, *Women's Life and Labour* endures not simply as a historical text but as a resource for envisioning fairer futures.

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