

Welcome to Volunteerland: How Volunteering Became Unpaid Work and a Subject of Labor Statistics

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ABSTRACTS

This article argues that the availability of statistical information on volunteering resulted from a variety of efforts to make previously obscured contributions to countries' wealth and well-being visible as productive activities. Since the late 1960s, economists from the Global South and feminists criticized international economic standards for their Western and male bias. These discontents led to the introduction of unpaid work as a new category of international labor statistics and umbrella term for very diverse activities, such as subsistence farming, housework, caring, and volunteering. This was the beginning of an epistemic revolution in data collection with far-reaching consequences. It changed the semantics of the concept of labor and enhanced the visibility of women's and volunteers' contributions to societies' well-being. But data collection also made volunteering more susceptible to political management and economic exploitation, and its classification under the general category unpaid work tended to blur the distinction between voluntary and involuntary activities.

Der Beitrag zeigt, dass die Erhebung von Daten zur Freiwilligkeit auf transnationale Bemühungen zurückgeht, zuvor ignorierte Leistungen zum menschlichen Wohlergehen als produktive Tätigkeiten sichtbar zu machen. Seit den 1960er Jahren prangerten Ökonom:innen des Globalen Südens und Feministinnen die westliche und männerzentrierte Voreingenommenheit ökonomischer Standards an. Diese Kritik beförderte die Einführung von „unbezahlter Arbeit“ als neue Kategorie der internationalen Arbeitsstatistik. Als Oberbegriff umfasst unbezahlte Arbeit sehr unterschiedliche Tätigkeiten wie Hausarbeit, Care und Freiwilligenarbeit. Diese Neuerung in der statistischen Taxonomie löste eine epistemische Revolution mit weitreichenden Folgen aus. Sie veränderte die Semantik des Begriffs Arbeit und erhöhte die öffentliche Anerkennung des Beitrags von Frauen und Freiwilligen zum Gemeinwohl. Gleichzeitig erleichterte sie den

politischen Zugriff auf die Freiwilligenarbeit als ökonomisch ausbeutbare Ressource, während die Klassifikation des freiwilligen Engagements als unbezahlte Arbeit die Grenzen zwischen freiwilligen und unfreiwilligen Leistungen zusehends verwischte.

“Not only is the volunteer workforce numerous, but also it represents an enormous economic force [...] This means that if it were its own country, the ‘Volunteerland’ economy would be the seventh largest in the world,” a 2011 paper by leading third sector scholars concluded.¹ This statement is striking. By including volunteers among the “workforce,” a term normally associated with the pursuit of paid activities for livelihood or business, and thereby emphasizing their economic significance, its authors conflate voluntary activities with labor. Moreover, they apply the scheme for ranking the economic power of nations to volunteers to estimate the value they create. In other words, the imaginary territory of Volunteerland rises from an aggregation of data that summarizes a wide range of individual activities in standardized terms.

Thus, Volunteerland is built on surveys and statistics, on the production of knowledge that yields data permitting comparisons of economic entities across time and space. At present, most states collect and publish such information either as an appendage to labor force surveys or as the results of separate inquiries focused on civic engagement. These statistics normally provide information about the social profiles of volunteers, for example, gender, race, income, type of volunteer activities engaged in, and weekly average number of hours spent on them. Satellite accounts attached to the United Nations System of National Accounts (UNSNA), the method developed in the 1950s to assess and compare countries’ gross domestic products (GDP), are used to calculate the economic value of volunteering.² In 2018, the UN issued its first recommendations for standardizing the assessment of volunteer activity. Also referred to as “volunteer labor,” “third sector,” “social economy,” or “social capital,” a 2003 UN report defined volunteer activity as “work without monetary pay or legal obligation provided for persons living outside the volunteer’s own household.”³ This taxonomy is a manifestation of the broad international consensus that volunteering constitutes unpaid work and can be measured in ways that allow for global comparison.

The novel international standard has resulted from recent developments. The systematic collection of statistical information on volunteering began in the late twentieth century and originated in a new political interest in civic engagement and the contribution of volunteers to public welfare. This culminated in a flurry of international and national activities around the turn of the century. Propelled by the UN General Assembly’s 1985 establishment of December 5 as International Volunteer Day for Economic and Social

1 Lester M. Salamon, S. Wojciech Sokolowski, and Megan A. Haddock, “Measuring the Economic Value of Volunteer Work Globally: Concepts, Estimates, and a Roadmap to the Future,” *Annals of Public and Cooperative Economics* 82, no. 3 (2011): 238–239.

2 Michael Ward, *Quantifying the World: UN Ideas and Statistics* (Indiana University Press, 2004), 76–103.

3 United Nations, *Satellite Account on Non-profit and Related Institutions and Volunteer Work* (United Nations, 2018). United Nations, *Handbook on Non-Profit Institutions in the System of National Accounts* (United Nations, 2003), 51.

Development and its 1997 decision to make 2001 the International Year of Volunteers, volunteering came to the fore as a new area of policy intervention.⁴

Efforts to produce statistical knowledge on volunteering thus reflected, and encouraged, a major shift in the significance of volunteer practices. Data makes things visible that before had been obscured, as studies in the history and sociology of statistics emphasize.⁵ But statistics do not just represent realities. According to the sociologist Bettina Heintz, they are a means of worldmaking in virtue of their performative power to create social facts and, so, bring about new realities, which in this case are new global realities.⁶ The availability of statistics serves policy planning and thus stimulates political intervention in regulating the newly produced facts. As the founders of Volunteerland claimed, data makes the “effective management of volunteer work” possible.⁷ Such “management” may involve appeals to citizens’ sense of “civic duty,” as the German government’s first report on civic engagement stated, and it can support tendencies to exploit volunteering for political purposes.⁸ It may include efforts to recruit volunteers and to channel their engagement in politically desired directions, for instance, to relieve overstrained welfare services.⁹ At the same time, the publication of figures displaying the achievements of volunteers signify public recognition of unpaid social engagement and are taken to indicate the strength—or the weakening—of civil society.¹⁰ This approach and the associated political claims tend to portray volunteering as a benign force that encourages social solidarity and cohesion. But research also shows that volunteering is more ambivalent. In the past, volunteers also attempted to extend cultural hegemony via their philanthropy or engaged in violence as members of volunteer militias.¹¹

The advent of “volunteer work” as the heading of an international category of statistical knowledge production, often as a subcategory of “unpaid work,” raises questions about its origin. How did volunteering emerge as a relevant subject of statistical study? What

4 For a survey of UN activities, see UN Volunteers, “An Overview of International Volunteer Day (IVD),” accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.unv.org/Basic-Page/International-Volunteer-Day-overview>. On regulating volunteering, see Pete Alcock, “Voluntary Action, New Labour, and the ‘Third Sector,’” in *The Ages of Voluntarism*, eds. Matthew Hilton and James McKay (Oxford University Press, 2011); Nicole Kramer, “Die Entwicklung des Voluntary Sector in Grossbritannien und Perspektiven für die Erforschung gesellschaftlichen Wandels in den 1970er und 1980er Jahren,” *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 42 (2016).

5 Alain Desrosières, *The Politics of Large Numbers: A History of Statistical Reasoning* (Harvard University Press, 1998).

6 Bettina Heintz, “Welterzeugung durch Zahlen. Modelle politischer Differenzierung in internationalen Statistiken, 1948–2010,” *Soziale Systeme* 18, no. 1–2 (2012): 7–8.

7 Salamon, Sokolowski, and Haddock, “Measuring the Economic Value of Volunteer Work Globally,” 220.

8 Cited after Ansgar Klein, “Grundlagen und Perspektiven guter Engagementpolitik,” *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte* 65, no. 14–15 (2015): 12. For a critical analysis, see Silke van Dyk and Tine Haubner, *Community-Kapitalismus* (Hamburger Edition, 2021).

9 Matthias Ruoss, “Vermarktlichung des Gemeinnützigen? Neuordnungen des public-private mix in der Altersvorsorge Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts,” in *Staatlichkeit in der Schweiz. Regieren und Verwalten vor der neoliberalen Wende*, eds. Lucien Criblez, Thomas Ruoss, and Christian Rothen (Chronos, 2016).

10 Robert D. Putnam, “Bowling Alone: America’s Declining Social Capital,” *Journal of Democracy* 6, no. 1 (1995).

11 On the latter, see, e.g. Thomas Adam, *Philanthropy, Civil Society, and the State in German History, 1815–1989* (Camden House, 2016); Peter Dobkin Hall, “Philanthropy, The Nonprofit Sector & the Democratic Dilemma,” *Daedalus* 142, no. 2 (2013). See also the contributions by Mara Albrecht, Eduardo Abouttaif, and Haitham Sakr and Maria Franke in this issue.

motivated statistical bureaus' adoption of the new category? And how do the new standards, specifically the classifying of voluntary activity under unpaid work, change the perception of volunteering?

Political and academic concern with volunteering began in the 1970s and 1980s, which followed a period of sustained economic growth in the industrialized world. It resulted from a convergence of unrelated developments. On the one hand, the skyrocketing unemployment rates and fiscal deficits that Western economies began to experience in the 1970s challenged the viability of welfare systems. In the following decades, political crisis management, subscribing to the neoliberal playbook of deregulation and privatization, led to welfare cuts and stimulated the search for alternatives to public services.¹² This marked the birth of what is called the third sector. "Conceptualized as a distinct economic sector," by The John Hopkins Center for Civil Society Studies, the leading academic voice in the field, it was conceived as a provider of health-care services and a range of educational, cultural, athletic, and leisure activities alongside the state and the market.¹³ On the other hand, simultaneous social movements, specifically second-wave feminism, took issue with the definition of work used in labor statistics, employment policies, and welfare benefits.¹⁴ In the international arena, economists in postcolonial states and feminist experts exposed the Western and male biases of standard methods for the collection of economic data. These efforts advanced "unpaid work" as a new statistical category and prompted changes in the semantics of the language used to describe work.¹⁵

In virtue of these developments, one must consider the changes in the taxonomy of global data collection in order to understand how volunteering became a subject of statistical knowledge production. This implicates two parallel developments normally studied as separate events, namely attempts to valorize volunteer work to make it more attractive and feminist efforts to redefine labor. As I shall argue below, the new knowledge about volunteering was an offspring, so to speak, of efforts to get unremunerated labor recognized and, thus, to acknowledge women's economic significance. This new knowledge tied volunteering practices to activities that were generally not voluntary but a consequence of gendered power relations. At the same time, these new concepts emerged as the internationally applicable standards for measuring volunteer activities in very diverse social, cultural, and economic settings.

The first section of this paper explores the late twentieth-century revision of international standards in labor statistics that allowed for the collection of global data on volunteering.

12 Niall Ferguson et al., eds., *The Shock of the Global: The 1970s in Perspective* (Belknap Press, 2010).

13 Lester M. Salamon, Megan A. Haddock, and Stefan Toepler, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Theorizing the Third Sector: Embedding Statistical and Methodological Developments Awaiting Broader Scholarly Take-up," *Voluntas* 34 (2023): 117. See also Peter Dobkin Hall, *Inventing the Nonprofit Sectors and Other Essays on Philanthropy, Voluntarism, and Nonprofit Organizations* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992); Matthew Hilton et al., *The Politics of Expertise: How NGOs Shaped Modern Britain* (Oxford University Press, 2013).

14 Nancy Folbre, "The Unproductive Housewife: Her Evolution in the Nineteenth-Century Economic Thought," *Signs* 16, no. 3 (1991); Arlene Kaplan Daniels, "Invisible Work," *Social Problems* 34, no. 5 (1987).

15 Lourdes Benería, Günseli Berik, and Maria S. Floro, *Gender, Development and Globalization: Economics as if All People Mattered*, 2nd ed. (Routledge, 2016).

I consider the forces that drove these changes, that is, the developments that led to the epistemic shift in the conception of labor, in the second section. In the third section, I use Switzerland as a case study to discuss the national adoption of these standards in the 1990s.

1 Converting Volunteering into Unpaid Labor

“According to the established labor theories that almost exclusively refer to paid work in manufacturing and administration, voluntary social work does not count as labor,” the German sociologist Gisela Notz stated in 1989.¹⁶ This was about to change. Beginning in the late 1980s, statistical offices in New Zealand, Australia, Canada, and the United States started to collect data on volunteering, either by adjoining questions about civic engagement to the national census or by commissioning special inquiries.¹⁷ Western European countries soon followed. For example, Switzerland annexed questions about formal and informal volunteering to its regular labor force survey in 1997; Germany conducted its first inquiry into civic engagement in 1999; the United Kingdom began to collect data on volunteering as part of its citizenship surveys in 2001 (which it rebranded as community life surveys in 2016); in Austria, the first official survey was conducted in 2006; and in France, the private association France Bénévolat took up the collection of data in 2010.¹⁸ In most countries, these surveys provide the empirical material for specialized analyses to reveal general trends that indicate the vibrancy of civil society and the composition of social capital, according to their authors.¹⁹

Official surveys lean on the work of independent scholars, most importantly the cooperative research of economists and other social scientists affiliated with the International Society for Third-Sector Research, which was founded in 1992. This network has been instrumental in developing globally applicable concepts, harmonizing terminology,

16 Gisela Notz, *Frauen im sozialen Ehrenamt. Ausgewählte Handlungsfelder: Rahmenbedingungen und Optionen*, 1989), 2 (own translation).

17 Mark Lyons, Philip Wijkstrom, and Gil Clary, “Comparative Studies of Volunteering: What Is Being Studied?” *Voluntary Action* 1, no. 1 (1998).

18 For Switzerland, see Guido Münzel et al., *Bericht zur Freiwilligenarbeit in der Schweiz. Sozialberichterstattung Schweiz* (Bundesamt für Statistik, 2004). For Germany, see the series *Freiwilliges Engagement in Deutschland: Der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey* published by the Bundesministerium für Bildung, Familien, Senioren, Frauen und Jugend, accessed October 4, 2025, <https://www.bmbfsfj.bund.de/bmbfsfj/themen/engagement-und-gesellschaft/engagement-staerken/freiwilligensurveys/der-deutsche-freiwilligensurvey-100090>; for the UK, see UK Data Service, *The Community Life Survey*, accessed October 4, 2025, <https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/learning-hub/students/resources/quick-start-cls/>; for Austria, see Bundesministerium Soziales, Gesundheit, Pflege und Konsumentenschutz, *Freiwilliges Engagement in Österreich. Ergebnisse der Erhebung zur Freiwilligentätigkeit* (Statistik Austria, 2022), https://www.statistik.at/fileadmin/publications/Freiwilligentaetigkeit_2022_Ergebnisbericht.pdf; for France, see the reports by France Bénévolat, accessed October 4, 2025, <https://www.francebenevolat.org/documentation/donnees-generales-sur-le-benevolat-et-les-associations>.

19 The German series *Freiwilliges Engagement in Deutschland: Der Deutsche Freiwilligensurvey* and the Swiss “Freiwilligen-Monitor,” ed. Schweizerische Gemeinnützige Gesellschaft (SGG), <https://freiwilligenmonitor.ch/>. provide regular analyses of officially collected data.

and stimulating comparative research agendas via several cross-country studies in the 1990s.²⁰ Its declared aim was the globalization of information on volunteering in order to “enhance the dissemination and application of knowledge about the third sector as widely as possible throughout the world.”²¹

In the international arena, its efforts at that time overlapped with parallel endeavors to reconceptualize labor that challenged established standards of data collection and the philosophy behind the definition of productive activity. Until the 1980s, the term “labor” generally excluded unremunerated work and was confined to commodified work, that is, activities generating monetary income and market value, conceived in terms of the production boundary of the UNSNA and identified as economic activities that contribute to a country’s GDP. Whatever lay outside the production boundary was thought to have no economic value and could therefore be ignored. Accordingly, individuals engaged in such activity were not considered part of a country’s active population.²² In the 1980s, this system started to invite fundamental criticism that questioned the accounting principles and taxonomies of international classification and aimed to dispute the validity of their categories by exposing that they originated in global power relations.²³ The International Labor Organization was the first international body to be receptive to these claims. Since the late 1940s, the ILO had provided a stage for discussing the status and value of unpaid labor, though without political implications until the 1980s.²⁴ In 1982, the Thirteenth Conference of Labor Statisticians mentioned “unpaid work” in its final resolution for the first time. In the preparatory report for the conference, the International Labor Office noted “the need to reexamine the existing concepts and methods so as to improve the conceptualization and measurement of the participation” of women in economic activities both in and outside the home. It also proposed that

*certain categories of persons not economically active but contributing to output and welfare should be recognized in a system of employment and related statistics [...] Three such categories of persons are home-makers, persons doing community and volunteer services, and persons engaged in certain borderline subsistence activities.*²⁵

20 See Lester M. Salamon et al., *Global Civil Society. Dimensions of the Nonprofit Sector* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999); Paul Dekker and Loek Halman (eds.), *The Values of Volunteering. Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (Springer US 2001). Soma Hewa and Darwin Stapleton (eds.), *Globalization, Philanthropy, and Civil Society: Toward a New Political Culture in the Twenty-First Century* (Springer US, 2006).

21 Statement by the International Society for Third Sector Research, accessed September 29, 2025, <https://emes.net/network/istr-the-international-society-for-third-sector-research/>. See also its mission statement, accessed September 29, 2025 <https://www.istr.org/page/Vision>.

22 See Eileen Boris, “Reproduction as Production. Thinking with the ILO to Move beyond Dichotomy,” *Labor and Society* 22 (2019).

23 Ward, *Quantifying the World*, 64f.

24 Eileen Boris, *Making the Woman Worker: Precarious Labor and the Fight for Global Standards, 1919–2019* (Oxford University Press, 2019), 72f.

25 International Labor Office, “Statistics of Labour Force, Employment, Unemployment and Underemployment. Report Prepared for the Thirteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians (Geneva, 18–29 October 1982),” *International Labor Office* (1982): 43.

In its final report, the conference recommended to governments the introduction of a separate category for “persons engaged in unpaid community activities and volunteer services.”²⁶ The report also mentioned that several countries advocated a revised and extended concept of “productive activity” that included “home-making and voluntary work, with the contributing persons accordingly being deemed to be a part of the active population.”²⁷ These proposals did not prevail since they conflicted with the production boundary of the UNSNA. But they laid the groundwork for “unpaid work” to become a category of international statistics. Moreover, by combining housework and volunteering and subsuming both under “unpaid work,” they envisaged an omnibus category that would include without distinguishing such diverse activities as caregiving, housework, certain types of subsistence farming, and volunteering.

The UNSNA and its definition of the production boundary had long been a key obstacle to the adoption of a new definition of labor, but this would change in the next decade. The UNSNA was introduced in 1953 to measure a country’s creation of economic value and implemented the market-based definition of economic activity developed by industrialized nations in previous decades. Its standards were gradually applied to national accounting in the newly decolonized parts of the world.²⁸ Its methodology first came under attack in the early 1960s when African statisticians denounced its exclusion of subsistence economy and blamed international accounting methods for misrepresenting the actual productivity of so-called developing countries. The UN Statistical Office partially heeded these complaints and in a 1968 revision integrated subsistence farming in the production boundary. But the revision did not recognize traditionally female subsistence activities such as weeding, collecting firewood, and carrying water. According to an early critic, women’s unpaid work was deliberately “excluded from the definition of work.”²⁹ In 1993, the UN Statistical Office issued another revised UNSNA and expanded the production boundary to include all goods made in the household. But it continuously excluded many services for household members, such as cleaning, cooking, and childcare. This revision was the result of close cooperation between the UN Statistics Office and statisticians from a number of international bodies and testified to the new leverage of agencies such as the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the statistical office of the European Community, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Bank in shaping the global economy.³⁰ The new influence of the latter two organizations had resulted from their role in the 1980s debt crisis and the

26 Resolution Concerning Statistics of the Economically Active Population, Employment, Unemployment and Underemployment. Adopted by the Thirteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians (October 1982), Art 13 (2), accessed March 3, 2025, <https://www.ilo.org/resource/resolution-concerning-statistics-economically-active-population-employment>.

27 International Labor Organization, “The Thirteenth International Conference of Labor Statisticians (Geneva 18–29 October 1982),” *International Labor Office* (1982): 14.

28 Daniel Speich Chassé, *Die Erfindung des Bruttosozialprodukts. Globale Ungleichheit in der Wissensgeschichte der Ökonomie* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013), 95–127.

29 Marilyn Waring, *If Women Counted: New Feminist Economics* (Harper & Row, 1988), 71–81, esp. 81.

30 Ward, *Quantifying the World*, 84–96.

transitions in postcommunist countries in both of which they had successfully imposed on debtor nations the neoliberal agenda of privatization, the slashing of welfare services, and the redefinition of political economy as the only road to salvation.³¹ According to Michael Ward, an expert involved in developing international statistics, it was largely owing to their influence that the 1993 revision of the UNSNA “gives a great deal more emphasis” to the household sector and women as economically significant actors.³² Because of a lack of research, one can only speculate about the reasons for this shift. The revision’s obvious parallel with what was then the international financial institutions’ new interest in gender suggests that the discovery of women as a resource deserving more attention for economic valorization was a pivotal factor.³³

Though the revised 1993 UNSNA represented a partial paradigm shift in the definition of economic activity, its impact on data collection was modest due to the lack of methodology.³⁴ Establishing new categories of unpaid work also proved to be an uphill struggle that faced enormous difficulties in distinguishing related but often overlapping activities, such as caring and household work and various forms of volunteering linked to religious practices or domestic work.³⁵ In 2013, the International Conference of Labor Statisticians devised a new concept of labor that incorporated “volunteer work comprising non-compulsory work performed for others without pay.”³⁶ The definition of volunteer work adopted the third-person criterion introduced by the economist Margaret Reid in 1934, which held that “an activity shall be deemed productive” if it “is of such a character that it might be delegated to a paid worker.”³⁷

According to the historian Eileen Boris, this revision was a milestone. In addition to volunteering, it also included non-voluntary unpaid work, both of which Boris subsumes under the category “reproductive labor and care.” “Accounting for reproductive labor meant expanding the concept of work to include nonmonetized [...] activities crucial for daily life [...] Care had become work,” Boris concludes.³⁸ In her interpretation, the revised definition acknowledged the interconnection between all sorts of unpaid work and the common good.

31 Ivan T. Berend, *From the Soviet Bloc to the European Union: The Economic and Social Transformation of Central and Eastern Europe* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

32 Ward, *Quantifying the World*, 177.

33 Pamela Blackmon, “Factoring Gender into Economic Development: Changing the Policies of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank,” *Women’s Studies* 38, no. 2 (2009). Elisabeth Prügl, “Neoliberalism with a Feminist Face: Crafting a New Hegemony at the World Bank,” *Feminist Economics* 21, no. 1 (2017). See also Jean H. Quataert, “A Knowledge Revolution: Transnational Feminist Contributions to International Development Agendas and Policies, 1965–1995,” *Global Social Policy* 14, no. 2 (2014).

34 Benería, Berik, and Floro, *Gender, Development and Globalization*, 85.

35 Benería, Berik, and Floro, *Gender, Development and Globalization*, 186f.

36 International Labor Office, *Report of the Conference. 19th International Conference of Labor Statisticians, Geneva, 2–11 October 2013*, International Labor Office (2013): 54.

37 Margaret G. Reid, *Economics of Household Production* (John Wiley & Sons, 1934), 12. See also Devaki Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN: A Sixty-Year Quest for Equality and Justice* (Indiana University Press, 2005), 38.

38 Boris, “Reproduction as Production,” 284.

In 1992, the economist Lourdes Benería concluded that “a good proportion of the progress made on conceptual and methodological issues regarding domestic work can also be applied to the case of volunteer work.”³⁹ The subcategory *volunteer work* thus entered the realm of international statistics in the wake of the redefinition of labor. The new international standards eroded the rigidity of the production boundary by advancing new concepts of economic activity that changed the semantics of labor and production more generally.

2 Counting What Counts: Campaigns to Redefine Work

Where did international bodies’ change of mind come from? We get a first hint in the 1982 report of the International Labor Office that observed that the

*ideas of the movement of women have affected all aspects of social and economic life [...] One statistical implication of these ideas is the need to reexamine the existing concepts and methods so as to improve the conceptualization and measurement of the participation of women in economic activities both in and outside the home.*⁴⁰

By 1982, this process was in full swing. Since the mid-1970s, experts at the International Labor Office had exposed the organization’s underreporting of women’s work in developing countries and pointed out the misrepresentation’s impact on economic planning.⁴¹ Based on these studies, the feminist economist Lourdes Benería, working for the ILO in the late 1970s, advanced a new concept of labor. She used the findings of time-use and household surveys from so-called “developing countries” to exhibit the productive nature of unpaid work.⁴² In a 1977 internal paper, she argued that women’s activities in rural societies were falsely thought to lack economic value because their work was not remunerated. Having no monetary value, their economic contribution was not recognized and consequently not taken into account.⁴³ In several papers in the 1980s, Benería explained the systematic underreporting of women’s work as the outcome of male and Western bias in the methodology of conventional labor statistics that were geared toward accumulation of wealth and economic growth exclusively. Consequently, only commodified labor appeared as work.⁴⁴ Because “an important portion of women’s work was unpaid,” she

39 Lourdes Benería, “Accounting for Women’s Work: The Progress of Two Decades,” *World Development* 20, no. 11 (1992): 1553.

40 International Labor Office, “Statistics of Labour Force, Employment, Unemployment and Underemployment. Report Prepared for the Thirteenth International Conference of Labour Statisticians (Geneva, 18–29 October 1982),” *International Labor Office* (1982): 3; International Labor Office, *Report of the Conference. 19th International Conference of Labor Statisticians (Geneva, 2–11 October 2013)*.

41 Ward, *Quantifying the World*, 114–117.

42 Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN*, 76; Boris, *Making the Woman Worker*, 122–153.

43 Boris, “Reproduction as Production,” 291.

44 Lourdes Benería, “Accounting for Women’s Work,” in *Women and Development. The Sexual Division of Labor in Rural Societies*, ed. Lourdes Benería (Praeger, 1982).

maintained, it was regarded “as secondary and subordinate to men’s.”⁴⁵ The feminization of work, she concluded, implied a depreciation of its significance and economic value. Luisella Goldschmidt-Clermont, a consultant with the ILO in the 1980s, was more narrowly concerned with methods of evaluating household production. She examined a number of previous studies, some of which dated back as far as the 1920s. Her aim was to disprove mainstream economists’ frequent argument for the exclusion of housework from the production boundary, namely, that it was methodologically impossible to impute monetary value to unpaid work.⁴⁶

The programs initiated by these two experts within the ILO helped to “decolonize knowledge,” according to Eileen Boris, and had the lasting effect of questioning “the basis of the existing sexual division of labor.”⁴⁷ The work by experts within the ILO initiated programs that revealed that sexism and Western bias had been closely entwined causes of the undervaluing of activities generally associated with women. The resulting studies formed part of the explosion of research in the 1980s on the global situation of women, a “knowledge revolution,” as the historian Jean Quataert put it, that originated in feminist discontent with the previous huge gaps in information about gender. These deficits were addressed as an international concern for the first time at the First UN Women’s Conference in 1975 in Mexico City.⁴⁸ The lack of data and the consequent invisibility of women’s unpaid work was a widely shared grievance—and one of the less controversial issues—among participants of the conference’s NGO tribunals.⁴⁹ Women’s economic role and how international methods of collecting data distorted it had also been a concern of the conference’s background papers documenting the state of research at the time.⁵⁰

By this time, the problem of women’s unpaid work had become a key focus, though one based on different needs and experiences and addressed through incompatible theoretical frameworks, of feminist struggles worldwide. In the early 1970s, the wages-for-housework campaign, a transnational grassroots movement originating in Italy, gained traction in various European and North American countries. Despite participants’ conceptual disagreements and conflicting strategies, the campaign launched a frontal attack on the gendered division of labor that resonated widely. It aimed to smash the seemingly natural link between femininity and housework by scandalizing the expectation that women provide vital services without pay.⁵¹ In its wake, feminists exposed the gendered nature of

45 Lourdes Benería, “Conceptualizing the Labor Force: The Underestimation of Women’s Economic Activities,” *The Journal of Development Studies* 17, no. 10–28 (1981): 10.

46 Luisella Goldschmidt-Clermont, *Unpaid Work in the Household* (International Labor Office, 1982).

47 Boris, *Making the Woman Worker*, 153.

48 Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN*, 74. Also Quataert, “A Knowledge Revolution.”

49 Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women’s Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (Oxford University Press, 2017), 10, 75, 91–93, 144–146.

50 United Nations, E/CONF.66/BP/6, Alexander Szalai, The Situation of Women in the Light of Temporary Time-Budget Research, April 15, 1975, file:///Users/ludir/Downloads/E_CONF-66_BP_6-EN.pdf.

51 Emily Callaci, *Wages for Housework: The Story of a Movement, an Idea, a Promise* (Allan Lane, 2025); Kirsten Swinth, *Feminism’s Forgotten Fight: The Unfinished Struggle for Work and Family* (Harvard University Press, 2018), 97–133.

volunteering, often by classifying the activities of volunteers under the general category 'unpaid work' and thus linking what women did in private and what they were expected to do in public.⁵² Rejecting appeals to female volunteering as a form of philanthropy, a practice that made overly strong moral claims on women as allegedly born helpers, Swiss feminists in 1975 declared, "we are fed up with unpaid housework and sick of altruism."⁵³ They situated volunteering in the larger context of the gendered division of labor they scorned. As they saw it, women's volunteer work was not all that voluntary, and, so, the distinction between voluntary and involuntary work was less obvious than generally depicted.

In the two decades following the 1975 UN Women's Conference, the call to valorize unpaid work and produce more reliable data resounded widely. Energized by local grassroots activity around the globe, specifically in so-called developing countries, these demands impacted regional preparatory meetings for the follow-up UN Women's Conferences in Copenhagen, Nairobi, and Beijing.⁵⁴ In its final document, the 1985 Nairobi conference was responsive to these claims and recommend that governments "measure and reflect" women's unremunerated contributions to welfare and development.⁵⁵ Three years later, Marilyn Waring's book *If Women Counted* (1988) propelled the campaign to revise international accounting standards. Waring, a feminist, pacifist, environmentalist, and former member of New Zealand's parliament, exposed the bias guiding the UNSNA's definition of the production boundary and unmasked international economic statistics as "applied patriarchy."⁵⁶

Her analysis was staggering. She revealed that any profit-oriented or gainful activity counted as productive regardless of its cost to human wellbeing or the environment. At the same time, the UNSNA made women "statistically or economically invisible." Such "institutionalized invisibility of women" and their reproductive work led to a flagrant misallocation of welfare payments, subsidies, and development aid at the global level. Waring concluded that the UNSNA, which had been developed by Western governments and exported to the rest of the world, was "another tool of colonization."⁵⁷ She

For an activist's account, see Louise Toupin, *Le salaire au travail ménager: Chronique d'une lutte féministe internationale (1972–1977)* (Les éditions du remue-ménage, 2014).

- 52 For examples from the German speaking area, see Gertrud Backes, Gisela Notz and Barbara Stiegler, "Sie nützen viel und kosten nichts. Ehrenamtliche soziale Arbeit von Frauen," *Beiträge zur feministischen Theorie und Praxis* 6, no. 8 (1983); Anna Borkowsky, "Die unbezahlten Frauenarbeiten," *Emanzipation* 10, no. 5 (1984). For the context, see also Regula Ludi and Matthias Ruoss, "Die Grossmütter und wir: Freiwilligkeit, Feminismus und Geschlechterarrangements in der Schweiz," *L'Homme. Europäische Zeitschrift für feministische Geschichtswissenschaft* 31, no. 1 (2020): 87–104.
- 53 Anonymous, Hauspflege. Im Zeichen der Nostalgiejeweile: Wir sollen heute die Vorteile der Hauspflege wieder entdecken, undated document [1975], AR 437.40.8, 2/2, SAZ, Zürich (own translation).
- 54 Ward, *Quantifying the World*, 175–178; Jain, *Women, Development, and the UN*, 75–80.
- 55 Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women, New York 1986, Par. 120, accessed March 7, 2025, <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/confer/nfls/Nairobi1985report.txt>.
- 56 Caroline Saunders and Paul Dalziel, "Twenty-Five Years of *Counting for Nothing*: Waring's Critique of National Accounts," *Feminist Economics* 23, no. 2 (2017): 200–218.
- 57 Waring, *If Women Counted*, 49, 233, 102.

also emphasized the similarities in the ways that statisticians treated volunteering as unmeasurable on the basis of prejudicial standards. Wherever volunteering was integrated into national surveys, she concluded, their classifications mirrored the hierarchy inherent in the gendered division of labor by valorizing the traditionally male voluntary roles in public services and ignoring female activities in the informal volunteer sector.⁵⁸

In later international debates, Waring's arguments framed the discourse about the productive role of women. In 1995, the final resolution of the Fourth UN Women's Conference in Beijing lumped a variety of activities together on the basis of their assumed gendered nature and the fact that they were unpaid and not valorized. It stated that women "perform the great majority of unremunerated domestic work and community work, such as caring for children and older persons, preparing food for the family, protecting the environment and providing voluntary assistance to vulnerable and disadvantaged individuals and groups. This work is often not measured in quantitative terms and is not valued in national accounts." The declaration repeated previous recommendations by calling for "suitable statistical means to recognize and make visible the full extent of the work of women and all their contributions to the national economy including their contribution in the unremunerated and domestic sectors."⁵⁹ According to its analysis, the lack of data and consequent invisibility emphasized the relationship between volunteering and housework and the assumed gendered nature of both. The 1993 revision of the UNSNA had partly responded to such claims by providing for satellite accounts, an instrument pioneered by Norway in the late 1980s to estimate in monetary terms the value of housework and other unremunerated activities.⁶⁰

In brief, the late 1980s and the 1990s witnessed mounting complaints about the deficits in statistics pertaining to women's productive role and the lack of recognition of the economic value of unpaid work. These grievances resonated with important international bodies. The repeated use in official documents of "unpaid work" as an umbrella term and the subsumption of volunteering into this category helped to universalize the idea that voluntary activities were non-remunerated labor comparable to housework and their value should be measured by the same standards. Their classification as unpaid work blurred distinctions between housework and volunteering, which caused a new set of grievances and, according to a recent paper by third sector scholars, led to "misperceptions."⁶¹

Moreover, feminist analysis of women's hidden contributions to economic productivity and human wellbeing inadvertently reinforced the association between femininity and unpaid work. At the same time, making non-monetized activities measurable revealed their productive character. The epistemic changes in the understanding of volunteering, and unpaid work generally, attributed a new relevance to such activities at a moment of

58 Waring, *If Women Counted*, 99, 141.

59 Fourth World Conference on Women, Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, September 1995, 67, 25 <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/pdf/BDPfA%20E.pdf>.

60 Ward, *Quantifying the World*, 180; Benería, Berik, and Floro, *Gender, Development and Globalization*, 208.

61 Salamon, Haddock, and Toepler, "Conceptualizing, Measuring, and Theorizing the Third Sector," 116.

pivotal transformation following the collapse of communism and the global triumph of neoliberal capitalism.

3 Establishing Volunteerland in Switzerland

The example of Switzerland shows in a national context the circumstances under which the new standards were adopted. The first Swiss survey of volunteering took place in 1997. Its findings appeared in 1999 under the title *Unbezahlt – aber trotzdem Arbeit* (Unpaid but Work Nonetheless) and reported on the total number of hours of unpaid work broken down by gender, age, social profile, type of activity, and, regarding domestic work, the number of dependents per household.⁶² The report's title and organization left no doubt about the nature of volunteering, all forms of which it classified as unpaid work and, so, as labor. Its use of "unpaid work" as an umbrella term and application of the third-person criterion offered a way out of conceptual dilemmas, such as the demarcation of volunteering from recreational activities, and yielded data that complied with international standards.⁶³

In 2004, the statistics office published for the first time the results of the satellite account "household production" (which included volunteering) as an estimate of the monetary value of unpaid services.⁶⁴ In explaining the reasons for incorporating such an account, the statistics office cited the 1995 Beijing conference's call for more substantial and better data and a series of similar parliamentary requests.⁶⁵ On a closer look, however, the collecting of data on volunteering, and other categories of unpaid work, had more complex origins. In addition to reasons offered, the revision of statistical taxonomy was mainly the result of three developments. The first was political efforts to catch up with long neglected international norms and standards. The feminist mobilization to change the established gendered division of labor was the second factor. The third was concerns in the 1990s about the future of working societies, whose welfare systems depended on payroll deductions. These concerns provided reasons for questioning received ideas about the nature of labor. But these seemingly distinct developments closely interacted.

The statistical reforms of the 1990s were informed by a change of course in Swiss foreign policy. International cooperation had long followed a narrow conception of neutrality, a legacy of Cold War diplomacy, that prevented participation in the UN's system of collective security and in other international bodies. This diplomatic isolationism froze the adoption of international norms and standards. In the late 1980s, especially after the failure of a 1986 referendum on UN membership, this policy caused growing embarrassment. To overcome the resulting deadlock in foreign policy, the authorities pursued less

62 Jacqueline Bühlmann and Beat Schmid, *Unbezahlt – aber trotzdem Arbeit. Zeitaufwand für Haus- und Familienarbeit, Ehrenamt, Freiwilligenarbeit und Nachbarschaftshilfe*, Bundesamt für Statistik (1999).

63 Bühlmann and Schmid, *Unbezahlt – aber trotzdem Arbeit*, 9.

64 Bundesamt für Statistik, *Satellitenkonto Haushaltsproduktion. Pilotversuch für die Schweiz* (2004).

65 Bühlmann and Schmid, *Unbezahlt – aber trotzdem Arbeit*, 9, fn 4.

controversial soft-power strategies to bring the country into line with the international community, such as ratifying important human rights documents and modernizing data collection. The exigency of statistical reforms was also an effect of the repeated complaints of international bodies that Switzerland underreported its unemployment because its data did not comply with ILO standards. Swiss policy planners and statisticians also expressed dissatisfaction about the incoherent and fragmentary results of official surveys.⁶⁶

New legislation in 1992 sought to “guarantee international comparability,” specifically because of the country’s planned accession to the European Economic Area (which was rejected by a tiny majority of voters in a referendum later that year).⁶⁷ In the previous year, the statistics office had launched the first labor force survey, using ILO standards. Its results were surprising. Because international standards set the bar for counting parttime employment much lower and included “atypical types of work,” the data debunked the myth of women’s weak participation in the labor market.⁶⁸

In this context, the authorities gave serious thought to integrating unpaid housework into labor statistics.⁶⁹ The first parliamentary proposals demanding economic valuation of housework occurred in the 1970s. They did not reflect feminist demands but sought to preserve the traditional status of housewives by making housework more attractive to women. Moreover, government memos at the time described housework as a “women’s problem” (*Frauenproblem*) as if it were part of the female physical condition.⁷⁰ In response to a feminist proposal in 1981 that explicitly targeted the gendered division of labor, the administration held that measuring housework was “not very useful” and fraught with too many methodological difficulties, but it also feared that such data would muddle the results of national accounting.⁷¹

By the mid-1990s, this line of argument was no longer convincing. In its response to two parliamentary resolutions, one calling for the collection of data on volunteering and emphasizing predominance of women in unremunerated voluntary work and the other demanding a statistical survey of all paid and unpaid work, the government cited the new international standards in acknowledging the economic significance of unpaid la-

66 Arbeitsgruppe Wirtschaftsstatistik, Protokoll April 27, 1987, E3321#1998|311#5*, Swiss Federal Archives (SFA), Swiss Federal Archives, Bern (SFA). For the context, see Jakob Tanner, *Geschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert* (C. H. Beck, 2015), 420–466.

67 Hans Ulrich Jost, *Von Zahlen, Politik und Macht. Geschichte der schweizerischen Statistik* (Chronos, 2016), 107. Bundesamt für Statistik, Projektskizze: Die schweizerische Arbeitskräfteerhebung, April 10, 1989, E3321#1998/213#182*, SFA, Bern; Schweizerische Arbeitskräfteerhebung, February 19, 1990, E7001C#1665*, SFA, Bern.

68 Die Schweizerische Arbeitskräfteerhebung-SAKE: Die Erhebung von 1991, December 1991, E3012A#2002/38#88*, SFA, Bern. Sabine Bitter, “Viel mehr erwerbstätige Frauen in der Schweiz als angenommen,” *Emanzipation* 18, no.6 (1992).

69 Bundesamt für Kulturpflege, Alfred Defago an Bundesamt für Statistik, December 23, 1986, E9500.197#2000/61*26*, SFA, Bern.

70 Parliamentary resolution of October 23, 1978, by Ziegler, E7001C#1993/263#1004*, SFA, Bern.

71 Parliamentary resolution of January 31, 1983, by Bacciarini, E7001C#1993/263#514*, SFA, Bern (own translation).

bor. It pledged to study ways to change how it collected and categorized economic data.⁷² This official readiness to adopt international innovations was indicative of the country's alignment with international standards. In the mid-1990s, the government's decision to add of the category "volunteer work" to the labor force survey thus no longer caused substantive debate. By then the objection that this would unduly burden the statistical office carried no more weight.⁷³

These resolutions about the collection of data originated with members of parliament who had close links to the women's movement and reflected a recent surge in feminist mobilization. In 1991, union activists had organized a women's strike to protest wage discrimination and the lack of recognition of women's unpaid work. With half a million women taking to the streets, the strike of June 14, 1991, fueled grassroots activity and galvanized female parliamentarians into making cross-party alliances in order to push for institutional reforms.⁷⁴ Having faced persistent pressure from the street and feminist grievances about the glaring underrepresentation of women in political bodies, parliament appointed a declared feminist a member of government in 1993. As the minister of the interior, she initiated profound changes in the government's legislative agenda for gender equality and welfare.⁷⁵

International events, such as the Beijing conference, helped to catalyze these domestic reforms. A national convention organized by traditional women's organizations in 1996 clearly demonstrated these changes. The program included key arguments of second-wave feminists and addressed the gendered division of labor as a political problem of high priority prominently addressing housework and philanthropic activities. The convention's records testified to the sweeping changes in the semantics of the language applying to labor. "Unpaid work" was now the overarching category that blended domestic work and volunteering, an equation that no longer required justification. Building on a decade of their members' grievances about the lack of public recognition for women's voluntary work, charities condemned the persistent association of volunteering and unpaid care with femininity. They also deplored the lack of reliable data that would exhibit the actual contribution of volunteers to the common good.⁷⁶

The ensuing calls for improving the situation of volunteers exposed a twofold strategy. One part was to raise the public prominence of female volunteering in order to enhance the status of women. The other was to stress that volunteer work was training for paid employment and thereby a different path for women to enter the work force. This line of argument, which emphasized the significance of volunteering for business, testified to

72 Amtliches Bulletin der Bundesversammlung, 3, 1994, 94.3309 Motion Goll; 943193 Postulat Fankhauser.

73 Internal correspondence re Postulat Fankhauser, E8001D#1997/5#1919*, SFA, Bern.

74 Fabienne Amlinger, "Die 1990er-Jahre," in *Jeder Frau ihre Stimme. 50 Jahre Schweizer Frauengeschichte 1971–2021*, ed. Denise Schmid (Hier und Jetzt, 2020), 173–176.

75 Fabienne Amlinger, *Unerhört. Die ersten Politikerinnen im Bundeshaus* (Hier und Jetzt, 2025), 138–142.

76 Documenting such grievances dating from the 1980s and 1990s, J2.257#2005/415#737*, SFA, Bern.

the prevalence of the new economic doctrine.⁷⁷ Both parts resonated widely.⁷⁸ By the end of the century, they had entered the official discourse. In her formulaic opening address to the International Year of Volunteers, the minister of the interior Ruth Dreifuss stated that 2001 “would also be the year of women because it is mostly women who come up for unpaid care work” and who “mend the holes [*Löcher stopfen*] caused by a predominantly male economy.”⁷⁹

Thus, volunteering had loomed large in public debate since the mid-1990s, when it was generally associated with domestic duties and housework and, so, was cast as a women’s affair. By the end of the decade, the availability and organization of official data substantiated this impression. At the same time, charities and volunteer associations faced growing difficulties in recruiting new members. Realizing that the previous emphasis on civic duty and sacrifices for the common good no longer appealed to younger generations, they embraced the language of business and foregrounded volunteering’s personal benefits such as the acquisition of skills, social networking, and widening volunteers’ horizons. They adopted a “market-economy orientation” in the organization of volunteer work that tied volunteering to the requirements of professional work.⁸⁰ It was mostly women who re-framed the subject by insisting on its significance for public well-being and the economy.⁸¹ These recruitment schemes paralleled internal reforms that led to the adoption of management techniques, knowledge-based approaches, and a new emphasis on effectiveness and responsiveness to political priorities. Other European countries saw similar trends, which strengthened toward the turn of the century with the approach of the International Year of Volunteers, which was an opportunity for charities and governments to increase their transnational exchanges and regulate their volunteering policies.⁸²

The inclination to frame voluntary work in economic terms and give it a business rationale corresponded with the new availability of relevant statistical data. Interest groups used the data to justify their demand that volunteers receive pension credits by emphasizing that their work relieved overburdened welfare services.⁸³ Unpaid work was now considered a new entity, a social fact susceptible to political demands, regulation, management, and, ultimately, economic exploitation. This ambivalence did not escape the notice of critical observers at the time who remarked that the exploitation of unpaid

77 5. Frauenkongress in Bern, January 19, 1996, program, Forum B fact sheet, E3012#2014/125#61*, SFA, Bern.

78 Erklärung an den Bundesrat, June 14, 1996, AR 90.10.4; “Arbeit ohne Lohn,” June 13, 1996, AR 90.15.6, Sozialarchiv Zürich (SAZ).

79 Standard welcoming address by Ruth Dreifuss, member of the Federal Council, [no date], E3807#2002/138#351*, SFA, Bern (own translation).

80 Kurzprotokoll Ideenbörse zum Projekt “Der Einsatz von Freiwilligen hat Zukunft,” September 29, 1989, AR 467.10.13, also Protokoll der NRAG_Sitzung, June 27, 1994, Ar 90.10.4, SAZ, Zürich. See also Ruoss, “Vermarktlichung des Gemeinnützigen?”

81 Erfassung der ehrenamtlichen Tätigkeit in der Sake, various documents June and July 1994, E3012A#2002/38#88*, SFA, Bern.

82 Alcock, “Voluntary Action, New Labour, and the ‘Third Sector.’” Colin Rochester, Angela Ellis Payne, and Steven Howlett, *Volunteering and Society in the 21st Century* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

83 Bausteine “AHV-Bonus für Freiwilligenarbeit.” Grundlagenmaterial zum Erarbeiten einer Eingabe im Rahmen der 11. AHV-Revision, September 1998, AR 467.10.13, SAZ, Zürich.

work contradicted the earlier aspirations of feminists. Moreover, they deplored that public recognition of voluntary work required that it be organized like paid labor.⁸⁴

The third factor that stimulated the change in awareness of unpaid work sprang from concerns about the future of labor. In the early and mid-1990s, Switzerland suffered a protracted economic recession whose relatively high unemployment indicated the transformations in the labor market that had resulted from globalization, the rise of information technology, and the concurrent decline in manufacturing. The crisis was a catalyst for intense public grappling with the changing nature of productive activity.⁸⁵ Business and other vested interests pushed for deregulation and labor market flexibility in order to cope with competition from abroad. But a popular referendum in 1996 on a new labor law to meet these demands failed to find a majority.⁸⁶

The controversies over labor regulations drew attention to deeper systemic problems. In 1994, the Social Democrats held a conference named “How to Redistribute Paid and Unpaid Work” and commissioned a group to study the issue.⁸⁷ One of their main concerns was the prospect of a future without work and its impact on the welfare state. Where would people’s income come from, and who could cover the costs of pension and insurance payments? The study group drew on the work of the French philosopher André Gorz who envisioned new models for the distribution of work and income in a postindustrial society.⁸⁸ In 1997, the issue informed a campaign for a constitutional amendment requiring an equitable division of paid and unpaid labor among the working-age population. Though it was backed by a broad civil-society coalition that included trade unions, feminists, churches, and liberal academics, the proposition missed the quorum of signatures for a popular vote.⁸⁹ Still, the campaign energized the public debate, and some of the proposal’s demands were taken up in parliamentary resolutions that paved the way for the introduction of a satellite account to calculate the value of unpaid work.⁹⁰

In brief, the 1997 survey on unpaid work and volunteering constituted a profound redefinition of labor. In the following years, the new data revealed the systemic significance of volunteering, both as an indicator of civil-society participation and, under the term

84 Lotta Suter, “Muss im Hause beginnen?” *Wochezeitung*, March 8, 1996; Mascha Madörin, “Die Hausfrauisierung der Zivilgesellschaft,” *Olympe. Feministische Arbeitshefte zur Politik* 15, no. 1 (2001), 92.

85 Tanner, *Geschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert*, 484–486; Margrit Müller and Ulrich Woitek, “Wohlstand, Wachstum und Konjunktur,” in *Wirtschaftsgeschichte der Schweiz im 20. Jahrhundert*, eds. Patrick Halbeisen, Margrit Müller and Béatrice Veyrassat (Schwabe Verlag, 2012), 139.

86 “Dossier: Revision des Arbeitsgesetzes,” *Année politique Suisse*, accessed May 5, 2025, <https://anneepolitique.swiss/dossiers/537-dossier-revision-des-arbeitsgesetz-arg5>.

87 SPS Tagung Neuverteilung der Arbeit, Ar 1.1140.19, SAZ, Zürich.

88 Gorz was widely read in the 1980s and 1990s and often cited in left-leaning journals such as *Rote Revue* and *Widerspruch: Beiträge zu sozialistischer Politik*.

89 Documentation of *Gesellschaft für gerechte Arbeitsverteilung* GeGAV, J1.298#2003/36#743, SFA, Bern; also records of the feminist party *FraPI*, AR 90.10.4 and AR 90.15.6, SAZ, Zürich.

90 Statistik, *Satellitenkonto Haushaltsproduktion. Pilotversuch für die Schweiz*, 5–8.

“social capital,” as a force for social cohesion and integration.⁹¹ They also provided cogent justification for political demands aimed at improving volunteers’ social conditions. Finally, data on unpaid work more recently provided evidence for feminists’ condemnation of the gendered division of labor, and they substantiated their demands for an equitable distribution of the burdens of caring and social reproduction.⁹²

4 Commodifying the Invisible? A Knowledge Revolution and Its Impact

The emergence of unpaid work as a new category for data collection was the beginning of an epistemic revolution with far-reaching consequences. The new category was by no means a purely Western innovation, and international endorsement of the redefinition of labor that followed reflected the growing importance of experts from the Global South in international bodies. Their discontent over the exclusion from national accounting of subsistence farming in so-called developing countries persuaded the members of standard-setting bodies to think more deeply about the concepts of labor and productivity. Increasingly, this expert discourse also reflected the transnational grassroots campaigns that politicized the gendered division of labor and the purportedly natural expectation that women perform vital services at home and in the community for free. The introduction of new standards that took unpaid work and its productive value into account was largely the combined result of these efforts. What had been eclipsed by the categories of orthodox economic theory subsequently became visible. The new standards converted previously concealed human activities into quantifiable social facts that can be observed across time and space. As a result of this epistemic change, volunteering emerged as an element of the uniform category of unpaid work and became a globally employed concept that applies to a field of otherwise amorphous activities.

The new taxonomy facilitated the ongoing transformation in the conditions of volunteering. Inserting unpaid work into the theoretical framework of market economics was in sync with broader, neoliberal trends of imposing market ideology on a wide range of institutions that serve human necessities from health, education, and social services all the way to states’ classical obligations to assure security and justice. The new semantics of the term labor encouraged the ongoing blurring of boundaries between work and leisure, public and private, state and market, citizen and consumer, etc. that is characteristic of the neoliberal age.⁹³ As a result, data collection made volunteering more susceptible to political management and economic exploitation.⁹⁴

91 See the series “Freiwilligen-Monitor.” For the social capital approach, see Markus Freitag, ed., *Das soziale Kapital der Schweiz* (NZZ Libro, 2021).

92 See, for instance, Mascha Madörin, “Zahlen sichtbar machen – wenn Frauen zählen: Nachlese zum Frauenstreik,” *Widerspruch: Beiträge zu sozialistischer Politik* 38, no. 73 (2019): 185–188.

93 See, e.g., Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution* (Zone Books, 2015); Colin Crouch, *The Strange Non-Death of Neoliberalism* (Polity, 2011).

94 For examples, see Rochester, Payne, and Howlett, *Volunteering and Society in the 21st Century*, 2; also Ruoss, “Vermarktlichung des Gemeinnützigen?”

In the end, international recognition of unpaid work had an ambivalent effect. A discourse scandalizing unpaid work started as a project of liberation aimed at smashing the gendered division of labor. But one of its outcomes was to reinforce the association of unremunerated activities with femininity as the prize, so to speak, for their official acknowledgement. The collection of new data seemingly substantiated the attitude that volunteering was a women's issue by suggesting its affinity with domestic work.⁹⁵ In its new meaning, volunteering continues to be a function of gender-based power structures. Finally, conflating categorically different activities—volunteering, on the one hand, care and housework, on the other—tends to blur crucial distinctions by conveying the impression that all unpaid work is done of the worker's own volition, which obscures the coercive structures of the gendered division of labor. It also obscures the fact that caring for dependents simply cannot go unperformed without causing suffering, whereas voluntary work, even if it is motivated by a deeply felt sense of obligation, can be refused. As a creation of the late twentieth century, Volunteerland is cut by the fault lines and exhibits the fractures typical of the global capitalist order and its power relations.

95 First addressed by Melanie Oppenheimer, "Voluntary Work and Labour History," *Labour History* 74 (1998).