

# Using social reproduction theory to understand unfree labour

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## Abstract

Most scholarship within social reproduction theory focuses on women's paid and unpaid care and domestic work, typically within the global North. Rarely has social reproduction theory grappled with unfree labour in commodity supply chains, particularly in the global South. However, these labour relations also involve gendered power relations that cut across the productive and reproductive realms of the economy, which can be illuminated by social reproduction theory analysis. In this article, we reflect on how social reproduction theory can be used to make sense of unfree labour's role in global supply chains, expanding its geographical scope and the forms of labour exploitation encompassed within it. Conceptually, we harness the insights of social reproduction theory, and Jeffrey Harrod and Robert W Cox's work on 'unprotected work' in the global economy to examine how gendered power relations shape patterns of unfree labour. Empirically, we analyse interview and survey data collected among cocoa workers in Ghana through LeBaron's Global Business of Forced Labour project. We argue that social reproduction theory can move global supply chain scholarship beyond its presently economic emphasis on the productive sphere and can shed light into the overlaps between social oppression, economic exploitation, and social reproduction.

## Keywords

feminist political economy, gender, global supply chains, social reproduction theory, unfree labour

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## Introduction

Social reproduction theory (SRT) has made important gains in conceptualising the role of reproductive labour within capitalist accumulation. In particular, SRT moves beyond political economy approaches that centralise the capital-wage labour relationship, and neglect the multiplex other forms of labour critical to the reproduction of human beings and capitalist society as a whole. Early social reproduction theorists drew attention to the importance of household labour, highlighting and valorising women's unwaged domestic work and its indispensability to the creation and maintenance of waged labour under capitalism (see Federici 1975; Laslett & Brenner 1989; Mies 1986; Vogel 1983). During the 2000s, the insights of SRT were extended to analyse the shifting and contradictory relationship between reproduction and production under conditions of neoliberal globalisation and to theorise the attendant trajectories of crisis, changing state forms, and the 'reprivatisation' of social reproduction (Bakker & Gill 2003; Bakker & Silvey 2008; Bezanson & Luxton 2006). This literature underscores the ontological inseparability of spaces of reproduction and production, that is, the necessity of adopting an integrative view of capitalism that transcends boundaries of public and private, the market and the 'non-market', and attends to gender and the 'fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life' (Katz 2001: 710).

Interest in SRT has gathered apace over the past two decades. However, to date, the insights of SRT have typically been developed with respect to so-called 'free labour', with an overwhelming focus on predominantly middle-class women's care and domestic work in developed countries like Canada and the United States (Bakker & Gill 2003; Bezanson 2006; Bezanson & Luxton 2006). Rarely have the insights of SRT been extended to the severe forms of labour exploitation captured in the concept of unfree labour, particularly in global product supply chains, and especially in the global South. One consequence of this focus is that the role of unfree labour within the global economy – frequently referred to as forced labour, human trafficking and modern slavery – has been widely overlooked within SRT frameworks.<sup>1</sup>

Unfree labour is now recognised as a central feature of labour markets and supply chains within the capitalist global economy (LeBaron & Phillips 2019). Furthermore, quantitative studies and the most reliable available statistics suggest that the prevalence of unfree labour across the globe is highly gendered and racialised – in other words, it is overwhelmingly performed by women, girls, migrants, and racial and ethnic minorities (ILO & Walk Free Foundation 2017: 10). In the light of the gendered character of unfree labour, and the critical role it plays in global production, notably in the lower rungs of global supply chains, this topic represents a notable gap in the SRT literature, and one that we intend to bridge within this article.

To do this, we draw on SRT to analyse unfree labour at the base of the global cocoa supply chain, through a case study of gendered patterns of labour unfreedom in Ghana's cocoa industry. Empirically, the article is grounded in extensive field research, which generated original, ground-level data on workers' experiences of unfree labour and overlapping forms of labour exploitation, as part of LeBaron's Global Business of Forced Labour project.<sup>2</sup> Other publications from this project have analysed various aspects of

this data, such as the business models of forced labour and patterns of exploitation across ethically certified and non-certified worksites.<sup>3</sup> This article focuses on women workers' experiences of labour unfreedom within cocoa supply chains. We mobilise SRT to analyse how women cocoa workers' experiences are shaped by gendered and migration based oppression beyond the productive sphere and how these relations structure and mediate labour in this setting. Cocoa farming relies on women and migrant workers' 'informal' and 'formal' paid and unpaid labour, which locates them at a powerful nexus of economic exploitation, class relations, and gender norms. We draw on interviews, a survey and participant observations that were conducted with cocoa workers as part of the Global Business of Forced Labour project to analyse these relations and explore the insights they afford into the dynamics of unfree labour, gender, and social reproduction in global supply chains.

Conceptually, we mobilise SRT's insights to deepen understandings of the role and contribution of unfree labour to global capital accumulation, arguing that the relationship between unfree labour and gender cannot be fully understood using binary approaches that isolate productive and reproductive realms. Rather, as our case study illustrates, understanding women's unfree labour requires a broad understanding of social reproduction as embodied and enacted at individual and household levels, and the ways in which these are tied to processes of value production. We identify key ways in which SRT can help scholars to better understand gendered patterns of unfree labour, and argue that understanding why and how women become vulnerable to unfree in global supply chains requires us to centralise dynamics of social oppression and social reproduction – not simply labour exploitation in economic terms. Furthermore, we note the importance of extending studies of labour and social reproduction beyond the typical focus on the global North, namely Europe and North America, and of examining unfree labour and the organisation of social reproduction in globally Southern contexts.

Our article is divided into four sections. First, we elaborate the theoretical framework for our analysis. We draw on Harrod and Cox's (1987) theorization of unprotected workers within the capitalist global economy, and especially their argument that social relations of production can render workers vulnerable to exploitative forms of work and therefore labour unfreedom. We fuse these insights to SRT and feminist political economy arguments that integrate analysis of the production-reproduction nexus as necessary to fully understand workers' lives and experiences of labour. In the "Research approach" section, we briefly explain our fieldwork and set out key findings from the wider study from which data for this article is drawn as these relate to gender and labour exploitation in global cocoa supply chains. Third, we detail our empirical findings, concentrating on gendered patterns of 'productive' cocoa labour and dynamics of exploitation, the organisation of social reproduction in cocoa, and the integration of reproductive and productive labour in cocoa farming. Finally, we conclude by offering some reflections on our case study for SRT and for further study of labour exploitation in global supply chains.

Before proceeding, it is important to clarify our usage of the concept of 'unfree labour', which has proved a contentious area of debate among scholars (for an overview, see Rioux et al. 2019). While it is beyond the parameters of this article to resolve these theoretical and epistemological disagreements, it is worth noting that our understanding

of unfree labour is premised on two key assumptions. First, that a binary definition of 'free' and 'unfree' labour is problematic, since it obscures the fundamental interconnections between forms of severe labour exploitation and other modalities of so-called free labour in the contemporary global economy (and, relatedly, the extent to which workers move between categories of 'free' and 'unfree' labour over time). Second, our definition understands unfree labour to comprise (an element of) coercion or compulsion, combined with severe constraints on a workers' ability to exit. Labour extracted through the use of threats, violence, or intimidation, the charging of excessive fees for recruitment or other services, the manipulation of contracts, deception, or under conditions of debt bondage can therefore be understood as characteristically 'unfree' (LeBaron 2015; LeBaron & Phillips 2019). To this end, our definition shares some similarities with the international legal definition of 'forced labour'.<sup>4</sup> For the purposes of this article, however, we prefer the concept of unfree labour, because it recognises the extent to which workers may exercise choice and agency in entering into exploitative labour situations, the porous and overlapping character of categories of 'free' and 'unfree' labour at the level of workers' everyday lived experience, and the role of economic coercion. As our data illustrate, workers stay in situations of labour unfreedom not only due to individualised forms of coercion, but due to structural, economic ones, such as the threat of starvation and destitution.<sup>5</sup>

## Theorising unfree labour through SRT

Broadly speaking, SRT attempts to rethink and expand the traditional political economy concept of labour and to theorise how labour power is produced and reproduced under capitalism (Bhattacharya 2017: 10). SRT holds that it is insufficient to focus on the cycle of commodity production and its implication in extracting surplus value from labour. Rather, understanding labour requires a political economic view of labour power as a commodity that is imbricated within a wider array of social processes and activities that produce and sustain everyday life, including 'the daily and generational reproduction of the commodity labour power and the social processes and human relations associated with the creation and maintenance of the communities upon which all production and exchange rests' (Bakker 2002: 16). While there are a number of definitions of social reproduction within the SRT literature, these typically converge around three key elements or processes: (1) biological reproduction, (2) the reproduction of the labour force and (3) the reproduction and provisioning of care (Bakker 2007: 541; see also Bezanson and Luxton 2006; Ferguson et al. 2016; Katz 2001; Luxton 2006).

SRT challenges the analytical separation of reproduction and production, and the so-called private and public realms of the economy. It foregrounds forms of work and social provisioning that have been historically viewed as non- or 'extra' economic, such as unwaged care and domestic work. In this way, social reproduction theorists demand a more holistic analysis of the integration of relations of production and reproduction 'as part of the same socio-economic process' (Bezanson & Luxton 2006: 37). As argued by Bakker and Gill (2003), it is the *processual* character of social reproduction, as historically embedded and differentiated, that is especially important, since it centralises the role of institutions, norms, and practices, questions of space and scale, and the ongoing

formation (and transformation) of social relations, such as those related to class, gender and race. Indeed, by encompassing the production of commodities and the production of human life within one theoretical 'totality',<sup>6</sup> SRT offers a powerful lens to explore how forms of social oppression (that are both preceded and interceded by class) operate in the reproduction of the labour force and the commodification of labour (Bhattacharya 2017; Mezzadri 2016). In so doing, SRT extends beyond the primary capital/labour relation to reveal the interrelationship of social relations in the 'private' or reproductive sphere and globalised systems of production and exchange (Ferguson & McNally 2013).

Building on the conceptual and theoretical work undertaken by feminist political economists in the early 2000s (Bakker & Gill 2003; Bakker & Silvey 2008; Bezanson & Luxton 2006; Hoskyns & Rai 2007), recent studies have sought to address a wider range of issues and contexts and, importantly, to fortify the empirical footings of SRT. This literature – while heterogeneous in its theoretical and epistemological underpinnings – is unified by a commitment to understanding the dynamics of everyday life under capitalism. Valuable contributions include studies of social reproduction, financial markets and mortgage debt (Roberts 2013), social provisioning, welfare, and pensions (Oran 2017), financialised capitalism and the 'crisis of care' (Fraser 2016), and social reproduction as a site of feminist political struggle and organising (Arruzza 2017). At the level of theory-building, efforts by scholars (Ferguson 2016; McNally 2017) to critique and expand feminist theorising on 'intersectionality' and to better explicate the links between axes of social oppression and processes of economic exploitation have moved the literature forward, as have efforts to harness SRT for the study of more phenomenological concerns such as childhood (Ferguson 2017) and sexuality (Sears 2017). These works speak to the limitations of structural-functionalist accounts that primarily focus on class and gender, at the expense of theorising how social relations are differentiated by multiple axes of oppression – class, gender, race, ethnicity – *and* how this relates to economic exploitation. This is an important insight that we aim to take forward both conceptually and empirically in this article, as we explore cocoa workers' experiences of labour unfreedom.

Despite these important innovations within SRT theory in recent decades, there are still important gaps and limitations in SRT that leave it insufficient to grasp labour relations in the global economy. Three limits are especially relevant to our interests in this article: the tendency of SRT scholars to overlook: the experiences of women working in situations of unfree labour: labour in 'productive' industries and global commodity chains: and labour relations in the global South. All of these remain relatively new areas for SRT. This is not to suggest that studies of SRT only focus on contexts within Europe and North America. No doubt, over the past decade, scholars have sought to remedy the uneven geographic focus of the extant literature by applying a social reproduction lens to studies of inter alia, migrant domestic workers in Malaysia (Elias 2010), women's work in the tourist development industry in Central America (Ferguson 2010), forms of state involvement in social reproduction in rural Mexico (Kunz 2010), and by looking at the transnational dimensions of social reproduction in the context of motherhood (Arat-Koç 2006) and structures of governance (Ruckert 2010). However, it remains the case that women's work in 'productive' settings is rarely explicitly addressed. There are some notable exceptions to this trend, including Alessandra Mezzadri's (2016, 2017) research on

labour exploitation and commodification in the garment sector in India, and Kendra Strauss' (2013) work on social reproduction and gang labour in the United Kingdom. Both are important reference points that we seek to build upon in this article.

The short supply of SRT research on women's labour unfreedom in the 'productive' sphere – especially in the global South – is puzzling, given the widely recognised role of social reproductive labour in the global economy on the one hand, and the significance of unfree labour to globalised networks of production on the other. This is perhaps reflective of a wider blindspot or, more neutrally, lacuna within the multidisciplinary literature on global supply chains, which has only relatively recently begun to prioritise questions of labour (Barrientos et al. 2003), including unfree labour, and relatedly gender relations (Bair 2005).<sup>7</sup> However, long before the literatures on global supply chains (also called global commodity chains, global production networks and global value chains) took off within international political economy scholarship, political economists were analysing how changes in global production systems were impacting workers. We find the work of Jeffrey Harrod and Robert W Cox especially useful here. While seldom referenced in the literature on global supply chains, Harrod and Cox's work on labour unfreedom offers key insights that remain relevant to understanding labour in global supply chains today.

Writing in the late 1980s, Harrod and Cox (1987) argued persuasively in their twin volumes on power, production, and social change in the global economy that political economists and policymakers needed to pay greater attention to the 'least powerful of producers within the world labor force'. They introduced the category of 'unprotected workers', which includes workers who lack representation through workplace organisations such as trade unions and those left increasingly vulnerable to exploitation (and therefore unfreedom) by lacking state intervention to ensure labour standards and workers' rights. This category, therefore, would include the unorganised women workers operating in degrees of informality in Ghanaian cocoa supply chains that comprise the case study for this article.

Harrod and Cox sought to understand the role of unprotected workers in the global economy, and the way that their life possibilities are impacted by shifts in the global order, specifically, in terms of relations of power and production. Their work brings together a wide range of case studies relating to the lives and working conditions of unprotected workers around the world, such as subsistence farmers, agricultural labourers, and casual workers, many of whom are located in the global South. The authors claim that large swathes of the world's workforce falls into the category of unprotected worker and they seek to integrate these often neglected workers into an account of global political economy. Alongside the geographical breadth of their work, what is innovative about Harrod and Cox's approach is their use of power relations – and specifically patterns of power – as a means of disaggregating the global workforce (as opposed to categories of occupation, sector, nationality or gender, for example) (Harrod 2006: 41). They are particularly interested in how a worker's position vis-à-vis a constellation or 'cluster' of dominant and subordinate power-production relations impacts on their conditions, such as pay, union representation, rights and benefits, and relation to other workers. This, in turn, situates unprotected workers' experiences within a broader analysis of

global production that encompasses a range of actors and structures, namely workers, trade unions, companies and governments. It is these varying configurations of power and production that shape how labour is divided and structured on a global level, and how it manifests in specific types of social relations or what Cox (1987) conceptualises as the 'mode of social relation of production' (p. 17). He outlines 12 heuristic modes, ranging from subsistence farming, household work, and self-employment, to central planning and state corporatism. While these modes can coincide in any given state or social territory, there is usually a dominant mode and a subordinate mode (or modes). Harrod (2006) explains,

Differences in degrees of power and authority, combined with different types of power holder and subjects of power, create different power relations. These patterns can be observed universally and thus the identification of them is not contingent upon country, region, or other socio-political variables (p. 41).

Harrod and Cox's dynamic, mutable and multifaceted account of the social relations of production, as configured by and articulated through patterns of power, moves beyond the state as the unit or boundary of analysis, works to socialise different productive modalities within a kind of dialectical 'whole', and usefully sheds light on the possibility of variation, transformation and change in the global hegemonic order.

Although Cox is frequently recognised as a seminal thinker within global political economy, Harrod and Cox's injunction to focus on unprotected workers and their relationship to the social relations of production has been, at best, partially addressed within political economy, where the majority of work still focuses on working conditions of more privileged workers, especially within the global North. This article seeks to harness Harrod and Cox's insights about unprotected workers within the global economy. We seek to integrate these insights with those of SRT to illuminate how workers are differentiated according to social categories and hierarchies (e.g. gender, ethnicity, race) and by their varying involvement in processes of social reproduction. We underscore the implications for attempts to theorise the *labouring* body<sup>8</sup> and decipher patterns of economic value creation and labour exploitation. This is necessary if we are to grasp how, why, when, and among whom labour unfreedom occurs and the multiple and relational forms it takes.

Fusing Harrod and Cox's theory on how varying configurations of power and production shape the power and experiences of unprotected workers with SRT insights about social difference, we seek to move forward understandings of unfree labour and social reproduction in global supply chains in two key ways. First, we analyse gendered forms of labour unfreedom and the role of unfree labour with the production-social reproduction nexus in cocoa supply chains. This expands the empirical and geographical scope of the existing scholarship on SRT, which, as noted earlier, has tended to focus largely on women's experiences of free labour, domestic and care work in contexts in Europe and North America, or on migrant domestic workers' experiences in the global North (Herrera 2008). Second, by using SRT to delimit the centrality of unpaid reproductive work to capital accumulation and the maintenance of everyday life in the cocoa industry, we explore the *systemic* logic of the intersection of gender, class, migration and labour

unfreedom. In so doing, we elucidate the social structures and relations that accompany the commodification of women's labour power in this setting and demonstrate why SRT matters more broadly for the study of unfree labour and labour vulnerability in global supply chains.

## **Research approach**

This article draws on data gathered as part of the Global Business of Forced Labour project, a multidisciplinary international research study that systematically mapped the business models of forced labour in cocoa and tea supply chains, based on case studies of Ghana and India respectively. The study comprised multiple strands of research and data collection, including the mapping and analysis of cocoa and tea supply chains, extensive field research in Ghana and India, and elite interviews conducted across Europe and North America between 2016 and 2018 (LeBaron 2018: 9–13). In Ghana, field research generated data on the business of forced labour within the cocoa sector, including on worker vulnerability to labour exploitation and forced labour, workers' experiences of working within the cocoa sector, and on how businesses profit from their exploitation. Field research was conducted in the two largest cocoa-producing regions in Ghana, the Ashanti and Western regions. Worker-level data were collected using a mixed methods design, namely a digital survey (N=497), ethnographic research (including participant observation, informal and group interviews), and semi-structured interviews (N=60). In total, the study included 557 cocoa workers drawn from 74 cocoa communities. The digital survey was used to generate baseline data on labour conditions in cocoa, the semi-structured interviews gathered information on workers' lived experiences of labour exploitation, and the ethnographic component complemented and deepened our understanding of labour conditions and the business models of forced labour, particularly in relation to dynamics of recruitment, migration, gender, wages, sourcing and pricing.

This article draws primarily on data gathered through participant observation and semi-structured interviews with cocoa workers. Additional findings on gender differentials in income levels are taken from our digital survey. In the Ashanti Region, semi-structured interviews were conducted in two districts: Ejisu-Juaben and Bosomtwe. These districts were selected because of their substantial contribution to regional cocoa production and because of their high population of migrant workers, who are documented within the secondary literature as being particularly vulnerable to severe labour exploitation (Mohammed & Apusigah 2005). In the Western Region, two districts were selected as sites for the semi-structured interviews, Aowin and Bia West, following the same criteria as the Ashanti Region.

In terms of demographic profile, 56 out of the 60 participants in our in-depth interviews were migrants, mostly from other regions of Ghana. Access to women workers was challenging due to gender norms and practices on the cocoa farms, which meant that we were expected to prioritise male workers for interview.<sup>9</sup> In total, 12 women cocoa workers were interviewed, of which 10 were migrants. Alongside diversity in gender and migrant status, we also sought to include some variation in age distribution among the sample, with the youngest worker interviewed aged 19 and the oldest aged 60. Finally, participants were recruited across the four different categories of cocoa worker (see "Key



findings: gender, labour and social reproduction” section): in total, eight leaseholders, 46 caretakers and two farm owners were interviewed, as well as four workers who worked in both day and contract labouring. This categorical breakdown is complicated, however, by the fact that some of the cocoa workers interviewed were engaged in multiple types of cocoa work. These dynamics are discussed in more detail below.

## **Key findings: gender, labour and social reproduction**

Our study found a coherent pattern of labour exploitation and unfree labour at the base of global cocoa supply chains. The three primary forms of exploitation experienced by cocoa workers in our study were: the non- and under-payment of wages, requirements to complete unpaid labour as a condition of employment, and the lending of money to workers and charging high interest rates. Cocoa workers’ wages were extremely low, averaging 30% of the poverty line amount<sup>10</sup> in Ghana, and workers had very high levels of indebtedness. In the most extreme cases, workers also reported threats of violence and dismissal, verbal abuse, physical violence, and sexual violence.

Gender can be understood as a key factor shaping workers’ vulnerability to labour exploitation in cocoa supply chains. We found that women are essential to the processes of cocoa production, in this context working as both paid farm labourers and unpaid family workers. Where women are formally engaged on cocoa farms, they typically work in the most precarious modes of employment, as contract and day labourers, and have difficulty accessing more secure (and typically better paid) jobs as caretakers or leaseholders. Where they are engaged as family workers, their productive contributions are largely unpaid and expected to be carried out in tandem with, and occasionally simultaneously to, their reproductive and care responsibilities. These patterns operate alongside (and through) patriarchal gender power relations and norms to severely constrain women cocoa workers’ ability to exit exploitative farms. Our research also found that women cocoa workers are particularly vulnerable to exploitation in the forms of non- and under-payment of wages and *nnaho*, a form of involuntary labour where workers are required to carry out additional tasks on the cocoa farm for free. Finally, women cocoa workers experience verbal threats, forms of psychological abuse and manipulation, and, on occasion, physical and sexual violence. As we explore below, gendered vulnerability to exploitation is driven by broader gendered social power relations, such as those surrounding land ownership and patriarchal familial and household relations, as well as the particular ways that social reproductive and productive labour overlap within the cocoa industry. Women’s vulnerability to severe forms of labour unfreedom in cocoa was compounded by the intersection of gender and migrant status. These dynamics are discussed in more detail in the following section.

## **The production-social reproduction nexus in cocoa**

Cocoa in Ghana is a cash crop produced by smallholder farms, which operate according to a sharecropping system. Ghanaian sharecropping arrangements are complex and are subject to regional and local variation (Hill 1957; Robertson 1982). We found that there

are two types of customary arrangements commonly practised in contemporary cocoa farming in the Western and Ashanti Regions: *abunu*, meaning 'share in two', and *abusa*, or 'share in three'.<sup>11</sup> The type of sharecropping arrangement in practice has implications for how workers are hired and paid and what their responsibilities are on the farm. In brief, there are leaseholders, who own leaseholder rights over part (up to two-thirds but usually one-half) of the cocoa farm and work according to an *abunu* arrangement; caretakers, who are hired by the farm owner to look after the farm on a seasonal basis and work according to an *abusa* arrangement; contract labourers, who are hired by the farm owner to carry out specific tasks or activities on the cocoa farm over a fixed period of time for an agreed price (and who are not therefore part of any crop-sharing arrangement); and day labourers, who carry out specific tasks on a daily basis for a set fee (and who are similarly not included in any crop-sharing arrangement).

We found that although cocoa is typically regarded as a 'male crop' (and men are assumed to comprise the workforce), women are extensively involved in cocoa production, as both farm labourers and unpaid family workers.<sup>12</sup> Where female workers are hired directly by the farm owner, they tend to work as contract and day labourers, and, more rarely, as caretakers. In total, we interviewed four women who worked primarily as caretakers in cocoa. There were no women working as leaseholders in our study. These trends are reflective of the barriers women encounter to accessing more secure and potentially better paid forms of employment in cocoa (and, in the case of leaseholding, gendered inequalities in women's access to land). It is also worth noting that the categories 'family' and 'farm' labourer are not rigid or easily demarcated, since many women move between paid labouring on cocoa farms and unpaid family work, both simultaneously and over time. Moreover, some women we interviewed had multiple forms of paid work in cocoa, for example, they worked as a caretaker or a contract labourer *and* a day labourer, as well as helping out male family members as 'family workers'.

Our research found some evidence of a gender division of labour in cocoa, which bears out findings elsewhere in the literature (Barrientos 2013). However, we found that this division was not definitive, with women's activities in cocoa farming characterised by a high degree of fluidity and flexibility. Where women serve as family workers, they typically undertake carrying, pod-breaking and harvesting activities, while men undertake tasks such as weeding, pruning and thinning, the removal of parasitic plants, and the spraying of pesticides. Tasks such as drying and fermenting the beans were carried out by both men and women. Where women worked as hired labour, including caretakers, however, they undertake the full gamut of activities on the cocoa farm, including pruning, thinning and pesticide spraying. Women's working patterns and practices in cocoa were further shaped by a range of other factors such as the time of the year, the relationship of the worker to the farm owner,<sup>13</sup> the size and productivity of the farm, and the availability of other labour. This results in a highly variable set of patterns and dynamics relating to the gender division of labour.

The difficulty of parsing out exactly how women work in cocoa, in what contexts, for whom, and under what payment and contract arrangements is itself indicative of the essentially overlapping character of social reproductive and productive labour in this setting. Indeed, during the research team's observations on the cocoa farms, it was evident that many women were undertaking both 'reproductive' and 'productive'

labour not just alternately/consecutively, but simultaneously, for example, by fetching water to mix pesticides while also collecting firewood for cooking; by weeding the cocoa farm at the same time as harvesting subsistence crops such as cassava for the preparation of food for the family; or by looking after children while also collecting pods for harvesting. The inseparability of these activities is partially a spatial and temporal one, that is, insofar as cocoa production takes place on smallholder farms, the physical sites of production and reproduction are largely the same. At the same time, these dynamics reveal the extent to which the production-reproduction binary is empirically difficult to sustain in this context, since these activities belong to one multifaceted yet unified socio-economic process: the production of goods and commodities (in this context cocoa) is dependent on the reproduction of the labour force (in our case, the maintenance, care, and renewal of the family farm), the material and social bases of which are shaped and constituted by the relations of production. These inter-relationships are explored in more detail below.

The character of the reproduction-production nexus in cocoa also has implications for women's earning power and pay. Specifically, we found that female cocoa workers are earning, on average, less than their male counterparts. The average daily wage for a female caretaker in our study was 4.41 GHS per day, or \$0.92, compared to an average of 6.45 GHS per day, or \$1.35, for male workers performing the same role. There are various reasons for this, namely relating to the ways in which exploitative working practices operate through (and are shaped by) unequal gender power relations and the organisation of the household. For example, we found that gender biases in hiring and payment practices mean that women are less likely to be hired to work on larger and more cocoa productive farms (due to the perception that they would carry out the work less effectively than men) and are less likely to be hired for better paid day labouring work such as pesticide spraying (which carries a rate of 20 GHS per day) and more likely to be hired for weeding work (which carries a rate of 15GHS per day). In addition, women reported that they were occasionally paid less than men simply due to their gender; that is, men would receive higher contract and day labouring fees than women irrespective of the activity being performed.

In terms of social reproduction, one key reason for the disparity in earnings (as explained by women workers themselves) relates to how much time women are able to dedicate to paid labouring activities in cocoa, in the light of their care responsibilities in the household. As one explained,

I am a working mother, working on the farm at the same time a mother, so when I go to the farm I do it to the best of my strength. As a nursing mother, what happens is by 9am I am on the farm by 12 noon to 1 pm then I am back home. (Cocoa worker 36, Western Region)

In this instance, the worker highlights limits on the quantity of time available to her to farm as a mother. Elsewhere, this was further linked to the size of the farms that women are able to work on, which tend to be smaller, less productive, and therefore generate less income for workers operating under sharecropping arrangements:

All that matters is the extent to which you could work. For instance, some of the work here is on bigger cocoa farms where yields are quite high compared to what I work on. So I am not able to get enough cocoa beans for sale, compared to what they get. So I end up getting less money.

These various constraints and barriers, which are not confined to either spaces of production or reproduction, have a powerful limiting effect on women's earning power and wages in cocoa farming. Moreover, these poor working conditions leave women vulnerable to other forms of exploitation and labour unfreedom, including the most severe forms, discussed below.

## **Gendered patterns of labour exploitation**

Women's low incomes in cocoa farming mean that they frequently have to take out loans to cover basic necessities, such as food and medical care. Loans are typically taken from the farm owner or the cocoa Purchasing Clerk and come with interest rates of up to 100%. As one woman working as a caretaker explains,

I am finding it very difficult to fend for my children so I have to borrow, I have to fall on borrowing . . . usually most people when you borrow from them you have to pay 100% interest. Although I don't have the money because I need the money to save my child's life I am forced to borrow and pay 100% interest rate.

Money owed in loans is usually expected to be paid back once the end of the cocoa season is finished and the caretaker is able to sell her beans. The difficulty of paying back borrowed money when incomes are so low is compounded by a complex system of deductions, fees, and fines in cocoa farming, which includes fees paid by workers to obtain a job on a cocoa farm and deductions from workers' wages/earnings for the cost of farm inputs. This works cumulatively to induce indebtedness among workers and often results in the worker effectively earning no money over the course of a season: conditions that frequently intersect with other forms of abuse, and amount to debt bondage.

Against this background, the women in our study reported that it is extremely difficult to leave cocoa farming, since they had no other sources of income or opportunities for work. As one described,

There is no other alternative livelihood for me and I also have to pay for school fees. I also have to fend for myself and for my children. That is how come I have to do the work like that although I wish I wouldn't do it.

Among day and contract labourers, women were especially vulnerable to practices of non- and under-payment. This was intensified by the intersection of gender and migrant status, since women workers felt particularly unable to challenge exploitative practices on the part of farm owners. Women migrant workers reported that there was little use in appealing to Chiefs or other community leaders to intervene in situations

of abuse because they would not be taken seriously, due to their dual status as women and migrants.

## Gender power asymmetries and unfree labour

Looking beyond the relationship between female workers and their employers, our research found that intra-household power asymmetries further shape women's experiences of exploitation in cocoa. As many women in cocoa work are not formally engaged by farm owners, but rather serve as family workers, they are forced to rely on their husbands to distribute the income generated through their productive activities. However, in practice, this frequently means that women are not apportioned an equitable share of the proceeds, as one worker explained,

I work on the farm with my husband. The farm owner usually gives the money to my husband who will then also give me some, in case I need to use the money.

Another expanded,

There are differences (in how men and women get paid), when a man gets paid he takes some out. Then he gives some to the wife to buy what she needs.

In the light of these dynamics, expanding the parameters of analysis beyond women's 'productive' labour in cocoa farming to consider how gendered patterns of labour exploitation connect to the social relations of production and reproduction is especially important – a point that links to Cox and Harrod's argument that patterns of power are an essential tool for delimiting the character and distribution of global production. First, and most basically, it throws into relief the considerable contribution of women workers to cocoa farming, which is belied by cocoa's reputation as a 'male crop' (see Barrientos 2013). Second, it reveals how patriarchal gender norms operate, not simply as an instrument of male control within households or communities, *per se*, but as structures that are implicated in the generation of surplus value in cocoa supply chains.

An obvious example of this occurs when women are paid less than men for the same work, which has the effect of cutting down labour costs for farm owners. It is also manifest, in a more complex way, in the extent to which women's contribution to cocoa farming is framed as either taking place in the (paid) productive sphere or outside it, in the (unpaid) reproductive sphere. Although it may be the case that women's overall contribution to cocoa production is statistically smaller when compared to that of men, as Barrientos (2013) notes, the *type* of activities women carry out in cocoa are essential to ensuring the productive yield and quality of the cocoa beans, particularly in terms of drying and fermenting processes. In this sense, the 'feminised' section of the cocoa workforce plays a key role in processes of value addition, which are in turn critical to the accumulation of surplus value. This parallels Mezzadri's (2016) findings on women's homework in the garment industry in northern India, which takes place on a much smaller scale than the factory labour performed by predominantly migrant male workers in the same industry.

Practices of intercropping in cocoa farming add another dimension of complexity to our analysis of labour unfreedom and the reproduction-production nexus in cocoa. Intercropping involves the cultivation of other arable crops, such as cocoyam, pepper, cassava and maize among the cocoa trees, an activity that is commonly carried out by women on cocoa farms (Agyare-Kwabi 2009). This division of labour can be understood to reflect dominant gender norms and practices in Ghanaian agriculture, whereby women have historically worked (or have been expected to work) in subsistence farming and men have worked in cash crops (Okali 2009). Categorising intercropping as a subsistence-related activity is understandable, since the crops provide an important source of food for the household and are not intended to be sold. However, practices of intercropping have been increasingly encouraged in the cocoa industry as a means of boosting the productivity of cocoa trees themselves (Ofori-Bah & Asafu-Adjaye 2011). This fundamentally complicates attempts to disentangle the productive from the reproductive and centralises instead the multifaceted economic contribution of women, as concealed within households. Indeed, while Cox and Harrod understood the 'household mode' as essential to social reproduction, this suggests that, in this context, it is also essential in directly supplementing production, as a 'reproductive subsidy to the productive household' (Mezzadri 2016: 1881).

What these examples indicate, moreover, is that, inasmuch as patterns of gendered labour unfreedom in cocoa supply chains cannot be abstracted from households and patriarchal gender norms, nor can their occurrence be explained deterministically in terms of the character of the 'patriarchal African household'. Reflecting on the development literature on social reproduction, Bergeron (2011) highlights how the growing currency of the 'intra-household bargaining' paradigm has served to shore up pervasive assumptions about patriarchal household structures in the global South, which are seen as a barrier to gender equality and women's empowerment. First advanced by feminist economists such as Deniz Kandiyoti in the 1980s, household bargaining models draw on rational economics and game theory to explain how women negotiate inequalities in the intra-household allocation of resources and labour, in different patriarchal settings and according to different patriarchal 'blueprints' (Kandiyoti 1988: 275). However, this tendency to focus on individual power relations and interactions between women who are family members and men who head households obscures, as we have seen here, the extent to which households themselves are shaped and constituted in relation to markets and through their integration into circuits of global production.<sup>14</sup> In this sense, what is important is how gender power asymmetries within households structure the *terms and conditions* under which women enter into production circuits and, relatedly, how these asymmetries mediate the effects of economic exploitation. In cocoa, our research suggests that the terms and conditions of women's incorporation into the paid labour force within global supply chains is highly unequal, precarious and characterised by degrees of labour unfreedom, a powerful matrix that is further intersected by migrant status. We also found that the effects of labour unfreedom are intensified by unequal gender power relations, intra-regional ethnic inequalities and patterns of North-South migration.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have explored the labour conditions experienced by women cocoa workers in Ghana, at the base of global cocoa supply chains. We have argued that these conditions are often exploitative and sometimes fall within the category of unfree labour. We have drawn on Cox and Harrod's insights about power, production and unprotected workers to argue that vulnerability to unfree labour within the global capitalist economy is not randomly occurring, but rather, is shaped by structural dynamics. Unfree labour in this setting takes place within a highly lucrative supply chain, with profitable transnational firms located primarily in Europe and the United States, as well as the Ghanaian government dictating the rules of business, which in turn shape livelihoods and conditions of existence at the bottom of the cocoa supply chain. Cocoa workers are living well below the poverty line and frequently confront severe restrictions on their ability to exit labour arrangements and exert rights, as well as requirements to complete unpaid and involuntary labour as a condition of their employment. Such dynamics underscore capitalism's ongoing reliance on coercion and unfreedom to facilitate and bolster profitability – in this case, in relation to a cash crop consumed by consumers within the global North – as well as reproduce the system as a whole.

We have also argued that the conditions and experiences of women working in the cocoa supply chain cannot be understood through investigation of the productive sphere alone, but rather, also relate to the dynamics of social reproduction which are integrated into and intimately bound up with commodity production. In particular, we argue that the cocoa industry relies on women and predominantly migrant workers' labour in both the productive and reproductive spheres, which often spatially and temporally overlap in the context of a woman's working day. We note that the women within our study tended to be more exploited than their male counterparts, and argue that this dynamic is grounded in broader relations of gender oppression anchored in patriarchal familial relations and industry dynamics. Although the insights of SRT have rarely been extended to severe forms of labour exploitation, particularly in productive sectors, and especially in the global South, we extend the application of SRT to explore these dynamics.

Our study carries lessons for future work on social reproduction and unfree labour. Namely, it highlights the need for research on unfree labour in global supply chains to foreground the overlapping dynamics of social oppression, social reproduction and economic exploitation. Too often, it is simply noted in passing that women or migrant workers are more heavily concentrated in relations of unfree labour, without any attempt to shed light into their experiences or the drivers of their disproportionate vulnerability. To grasp these, we need to go beyond economic emphasis on the productive sphere to explore the ways that households and reproductive activities and relations shape labour relations and conditions. Mobilising the insights of SRT to examine a broader and more variegated range of labour relations – including unfree labour, workers in the global South, and those in productive industry – is a promising route forward.

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## Notes

1. Unfree labour, forced labour, human trafficking and modern slavery are contested terms and it is beyond the scope of this article to fully define these here. Simply put, while forced labour is a popular concept well-defined by international law and the ILO's 1930 Convention on Forced Labour in particular, it has serious shortcomings – namely, that it excludes workers confined to their job by economic coercion (such as the threat of starvation or destitution). The concept of unfree labour seeks to capture the full range of coerced labour relations in capitalist society.
2. This article draws on data from the Global Business of Forced Labour project, <http://globalbusinessofforcedlabour.group.shef.ac.uk/>
3. For an overview of the project's findings, see Genevieve LeBaron (2018) *The Global Business of Forced Labour: Report of Findings*, SPERI & University of Sheffield.
4. This definition is set out in the International Labour Organization's 1930 Forced Labour Convention, which stipulates forced labour as 'all work or service which is exacted from any person under the menace of any penalty and for which the said person has not offered himself voluntarily'.
5. For a critique of the ILO definition of forced labour and a more in-depth discussion of dynamics of worker choice and agency at the point of entry and constraints of economic necessity, see LeBaron et al., 2018.
6. Our usage of 'totality' should not be understood deterministically, but rather draws on Marx's dialectic of the 'concrete' and 'abstract', that is, the process through which theoretical propositions and generalisations are generated through constant interaction with and in relation to the 'concrete', the actual material realities of any given period. Thought is in this sense a function of the concrete-abstract dialectic, 'a process of concentration' as Marx puts it, which reflects 'a rich totality of many determinations and relations' (Marx 1993[1857]: 100).
7. Even here, gender has tended to function more as a proxy for 'women' than as a tool for understanding the broader imbrication of social reproduction within regimes of global production (Ferguson 2010).
8. We use the figure of the labouring body here to denote the difference between work and labour, as per Gramsci, and to underline the extent to which work under capitalism comes to be defined as labour through a specific social relation, that is, the capital-labour relation. This definition acknowledges, therefore, that it is also possible for work to exist outside of this relation, namely under a non-capitalistic mode of economic organisation (see Bakker & Gill 2003: 19).
9. As a result, some interviews with female cocoa workers had to be abandoned when male workers or family members returned to the farms.
10. These calculations are based on the World Bank's poverty line figure for lower-middle income countries, such as India and Ghana, which is \$3.20 (£2.35) per day.
11. Under the *abusa* arrangement, the farm owner and the tenant divide the produce (or proceeds)



- from the farm into three, with the farm owner taking two-thirds and the tenant taking one-third. Under the *abunu* arrangement, it is the farmland that is typically divided into two, with the tenant and farm owner each taking one-half. All the produce from the divided portion of the land then belongs to the tenant (see Hill 1957; Robertson 1982).
12. The notion of 'family workers' is here used to refer to women who work on cocoa farms alongside a male family member, typically their husband, who is formally engaged by the farm owner.
  13. For example, a number of women hired directly to work on cocoa farms in our study were employed by an older family member who owned the land. This may reflect the extent to which it is easier for women to obtain paid work through kinship ties in cocoa, rather than on the open market. In general, the working conditions of these workers (who were indigenes) tended to be slightly better than those employed by non-family members (who were migrants). Reasons for this difference include the women's less precarious positions as care-takers, the fact that they were less likely to experience forms of exploitation such as non- or under-payment, and their enhanced ability to hire day and contract labour (thus reducing their workload and boosting productivity). This gives some insight into the intersection of gender and migrant status in this context.
  14. Household bargaining models have been critiqued for adopting a heteronormative view of the household unit (typically a heterosexual couple living with children) and excluding a variety of other household configurations, for example, same-sex families (Bergeron 2011), or as is more relevant to this case study, female-headed households.

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