
Nuture Commodified: an investigation of gender and work in an emerging breast milk industry

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Résumé

The practice of expressing breast milk has grown in recent years, in the first instance to ‘liberate’ mothers in their return to work whilst providing optimum nutrition for their babies. It has further expanded to expression for “voluntary” milk banking and commercial supply for neonatal care and beyond. The material conditions in which women donate or sell breast milk range widely, on the basis of their class and geographical provenance. The commercialisation of breast milk provision has become one of the newest frontiers of the global bioeconom. It throws up questions related to debates on the transnational reconfiguration of social reproduction (Bakker 2007; LeBaron 2010; Steans & Tepe 2010) as they intersect with discourses on motherhood and healthy child development as well as contemporary processes of commodification of the body and the emergence of new gendered forms of atypical work in the global economy (Sassen, 2002). This article presents a study of the Indian company NeoLacta Lifesciences that recently opened the first commercial milk bank in India and has obtained a permit to begin exporting human breast milk to Australia. These practices may be seen to be part of a wider Reproductive Industrial Complex (Vertommen 2017), in which women’s reproductive bodily capacities are enrolled in wider economic and financial processes, instantiating new relations between gender, race, economies and care. This article employs a feminist political economy framework that places into dialogue analyses of social reproduction and commodification with feminist science/technology studies and medical/political anthropology in order to analyse the social, political, and technical processes that transform breast milk into a commodity that is internationally traded and the implications of this for contemporary understandings of work and gender. In particular, we consider the role and processes of commodification in shaping the fluid distinction and relations between paid/unpaid, wage/unwaged and work/non-work as a fruitful extension to current debates in IPE.

Mots-Clés: commodification, social reproduction, commodity chains

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