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Hidden Abodes in Plain Sight: The Social Reproduction of Households and Labour in the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

This article deploys a feminist political economy approach centred on social reproduction to analyse the reconfiguration and regeneration of multiple inequalities in households and the labour markets during the COVID-19 pandemic. Based on this approach, the analysis unpacks the multiple trajectories of fragility the current crisis is intervening on and re-shaping in the home and in the world of work, and their gendered and racialised features across the world. It shows how the pandemic and the measures to contain it have further deepened the centrality of households and reproductive work in the functioning of capitalism, and argues that the transformative potential of the crisis can only be harnessed framing policy and political responses around social reproduction and its essential contributions to work and life.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has triggered a double crisis in public health and the economy that is evolving at an unparalleled pace across the globe. The depth of this crisis and its compounded dimensions require approaches that go beyond the calculation of the economic impacts, as distinct from and devoid of their social aspects. Approaches that examine socio-economic relations across various components of local and global economies are essential. This paper argues that a feminist political economy perspective, centred on social reproduction, is necessary to understand the COVID-19 crisis. This approach overcomes key limits in mainstream economic and political economy analyses that are blind to the social relations that constitute the economy or overwhelmingly focused on production at the expense of reproduction.

We draw on Cindi Katz's definition of social reproduction, which encompasses the biological reproduction of human life, through both every day and intergenerational activities and practices, and the production and reproduction of a socially differentiated labour force, which is historically and geographically specific and entails cultural and material relations (Katz, 2001). Thus, we combine feminist economics' work on care and households (Folbre, 1986; Agarwal, 1997; Razavi, 2011) and Marxist feminist analyses of social reproduction, engaged with both societal

reproduction (Bakker, 2007; Bhattacharya, 2017) and with the reproductive dynamics of labour processes and relations (Mies, 1986; Mezzadri, 2019; Mezzadri et al., forthcoming).

We deploy this approach to analyse the regeneration of inequalities in households and global labour markets, spaces that have been set apart but are in fact intimately interconnected, to trace how the coronavirus crisis has disrupted and, to an extent, reconfigured a central pillar of global capitalism: the organisation of work. Our analysis starts from an illustration of the fragilities in households and global labour markets prior to pandemic, and then focuses on how the COVID-19 pandemic intervenes on, changes and reconfigures the organisation of productive and reproductive work. These shifts, our analysis highlights, bear implications for the reproduction, reinforcement or alteration of gender, race and class inequalities cutting across both households and realms of work, which should be addressed through multiple policies and politics of redistribution. Notably, through its focus on social reproduction, our analysis of the COVID-19 crisis shows the renewed centrality of the household, yet in ways that also pay attention to the broader and complex productive and reproductive dynamics in which both work and life unfold.

The paper is organised as follows. After this introduction, section 2 focuses on dimensions of fragility prior to the pandemic; section 3 analyses key aspects of change and emerging inequalities; and section 4 reflects on the transformative potential of the crisis and formulates the foundations of an internationalist feminist response.

2. Social Reproduction 1.0: The fragilities of households and labour markets prior to the pandemic

Feminist economists and political economists have long pointed out how the dominant economic models and the neoliberal economic paradigm have produced economic systems that are skewed towards the growth of the Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and narrowly-defined ‘productive’ activities, which makes them ill-equipped to enable and sustain social and care provisioning and the creation of well-being (Power, 2004; Himmelweit, 2007; Floro, 2019). In fact, global capitalism thrives on the devaluation and squeeze of care and social reproduction. As theorised by Nancy Fraser, we are living through a chronic crisis of care produced by capitalism; in its most recent financialised form, capitalism sees financial capital disciplining the state to serve the interests of the private sector, resulting in further intensification of the contradictions between economic production and social reproduction (Fraser, 2017).

These contradictions can be clearly seen through the household lens. Why? Because households have become increasingly responsible for the provision of welfare (Benería and Feldman, 1992; Pearson, 1997; Razavi, 2011; Cooper, 2017). Care needs and the soaring costs of access to privatised health, education and utilities have been increasingly placed in the hands of households and came to be privately shouldered by families. This is one of the outcomes of the process of *(re)privatisation of social reproduction* that unfolded during neoliberalism (Bakker, 2007). The retreat of the welfare state led to a shift in the burden of welfare provisioning from the state back onto households (Pearson, 2007; Razavi, 2011).¹ However, differently from pre-existing forms of family-centred provisioning, neoliberal capitalism encroaches on the work of social reproduction by devaluing it, concealing it behind the walls of the home and, at the same time, promoting its

¹ In many contexts, the retreat of the state occurred after a phase of capitalism based on the Fordist mode of production where the costs of social reproduction were in part taken up by the welfare state (Bakker, 2007).

commodification (Mies, 1986; Bakker, 2007). Sustaining the privatisation of social reproduction is the ethic of individual and family responsibility that has been promoted through the neoliberal political rhetoric, originating in the UK and the US, and achieved through substantial changes in economic and social policy, aided by the international institutions that forcefully imposed neoliberal policies in the Global South (Benería and Feldman, 1992; Cooper, 2017). In contexts where the welfare state was never particularly developed, the withdrawal of the state was obviously less consequential but, nonetheless, the growing commodification of life through the global circuits of capital imposed unpaid and wageless labour as a condition of production (Mezzadri, 2019), heightening both the mutual constitution and the tensions between productive and reproductive work (Kunz, 2010).

Central to the privatisation of social reproduction is the long-term privatisation and marketisation of health care systems (O’Laughlin, 2016). While these processes have been observed across most countries in the world, the association between International Monetary Fund (IMF) lending and low public health spending has been particularly detrimental for poorer countries (Kentikelenis et al., 2015). The gendered construction of health care provisioning, alongside households’ extended roles in welfare policy, have produced stark gendered impacts with women disproportionately affected by the negative consequences of health care privatisation (Gideon, 2008). These transformations have left countries with health care systems that are ill-prepared to cope with the current health crisis (Simeoni, 2020).

The privatisation of social reproduction has heightened inequalities across and within households. The wealthier households took advantage of commodified social reproduction work by outsourcing care and domestic work to hired domestic workers, who often are migrant women (Anderson, 1997; Fraser, 2017). The poorer households had to absorb the overgrown responsibilities by extending their working day, taking up a variety of poorly-paid and insecure jobs and juggling reproductive and productive work, with significant gendered implications owing to women’s and children’s disproportionate responsibilities for domestic work (Gideon, 2008; Whitehead, 2009).

Compounding the reproduction of inequalities through the regime of privatised social reproduction is the process of financialisation, which has underpinned the accumulation of household debt in countries such as the US, UK and many emerging economies (Lapavitsas, 2009; Karwoski and Stockhammer, 2017). The withdrawal of the state from public provisioning went hand in hand with banks turning to households and, as a result, more and more households have been drawn into the financial market as both investors and debtors (Lapavitsas, 2011; Roberts, 2016). Working class and lower-middle class households are those most affected by the precarisation of labour, reliance on consumer credit and over-exposure to financial debt (Bryan et al., 2016).

The broad changes at the household level cannot be understood unless we explore the interconnections between production and reproduction in global labour markets, however. As households have been called to increasingly absorb the shocks due to shrinking public expenditure, their social wage needs have substantially increased, particularly amidst declining real family wages. In effect, they have been subject to a double-squeeze. In this context, the entry of armies of women into paid employment has hardly been surprising and the feminisation of employment has

underpinned export-based industrialization and the growth of informal work (Elson and Pearson, 1981; Seguino, 1997; Standing, 1999).

Crucially, the combined effect of these pressures on households and on gendered division of labour, nationally and internationally, has taken place within a broader context of restructuring of labour relations and markets for *all*, women and men alike. Worldwide, precarious, informal and casualised work rates have risen since the 1970s, and today clearly dominate. According to the ILO (2018a), 61.9 percent of total employment on our planet is informal or informalised. It is now clear that the two decades of labour gains in terms of rights and job security in the West during the Keynesian era did not represent but an exception to a global tendency towards the deterioration of working conditions (Bremans and van der Linden, 2014).

Increasingly, many of these precarious jobs available to the working poor in the Global South are connected to global value chains and production networks. According to many observers, the organisation of these chains and networks, often based on their reliance on cheap labour, either consolidated or even worsened forms of unequal exchange between the Global South and Global North, turning them into ‘global inequality or poverty chains’ (Quentin and Campling, 2018; Selwyn, 2019). A vast literature illustrates how women, ethnic minorities and migrants are generally located at the bottom of these chains and networks, and may obtain only marginal gains due to ‘adverse incorporation’ (Phillips, 2011).

In volatile supply chains, like garment, buyers have been unable to guarantee living wages (Edwards et al, 2019). Moreover, profitability has been ensured through a squeeze to labour rights overall for workers in these chains (Anner, 2020). On the other hand, labour markets have always been vehicles for the reproduction of inequalities. As theorised by Diane Elson, they are gendered institutions. The labour markets characterising supply chains are hardly an exception. In fact, the widespread presence of women workers, at low salary level and in precarious employment, further confirms the contemporary relevance of Elson’s insights (Bair, 2010).

Notably, the gendering of labour market outcomes along supply chains intersects with other forms of existential inequalities (Therborn, 2013) and social oppression (Hart, 2002; Bannerji, 2011). In particular, intersections of gender with race, ethnicity and mobility appear particularly relevant in mediating adverse incorporation in global production networks. Moreover, it is also the case across global care chains (Yeates, 2004), where the intersections of class, gender and race characterising paid domestic and care work vary considerably, based on past and present interconnections between sending and receiving countries. Along these chains processes of feminisation and racialization (ILO, 2018b), combine with mobility along North-South divides to ensure and systematically recreate the conditions for labour devaluation. It is in the context of these processes that the crisis triggered by COVID-19 should be analysed and understood.

3. Seeing the COVID-19 crisis through the social reproduction of households and labour

The tragic outcomes of the COVID-19 crisis, which are still unravelling as we write, testify to the greatly damaging effects of decades of neoliberalisation, austerity and privatisation of social reproduction. These effects were already analysed by feminist economists in the aftermath of the Structural Adjustment programmes (Benería and Feldman, 1992) and the 2008 financial crisis

(Fukuda-Parr et al., 2013). At the same time, however, this crisis is also fundamentally different from previous ones (see also Mezzadri, 2020), because it shakes a foundational element of our economies and societies: the organisation of work, in its multiple forms. Once again, in order to fully analyse this process, we need to consider the interplay between reproductive and productive work. In particular, we need to explore the effects of the crisis in the world of work, and its interconnection with the reorganisation of the role of the household within it, as illustrated in Figure 1. Ultimately, the consequences of COVID-19 exacerbate an already-critical situation in terms of socio-economic inequality and the squeeze on social reproduction across the globe. However, the crisis may also lay the foundations for a shift in gender relations, and a new or rediscovered appreciation for socially reproductive labour by society as a whole.

Figure 1 here

A social reproduction perspective draws attention to two key transformations triggered by the COVID-19 crisis, at least at the onset of it. First, the intensification of social reproduction work taken up by households and the differential impact of this depending on the nature and make-up of the household and the material differences driven by socio-economic relations. Second, a shift in the balance between sectors of the economy deemed as low-skilled and low-value producing and those typically considered to be high-skilled and high-value producing, where the former tend to see a concentration of women, migrants and ethnic minorities. On the one hand, those who continue to work outside their home are exposed to serious health risks, but on the other hand these workers have had to be recognised as essential.² We will look at these two processes through the re-organisation of work in households and global labour markets.

Renewed centrality of households

The imposition of lockdowns as a primary response to the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a dramatic shift of life and work from collective and public spaces to individualised and private ones, although the apparent more marked distinction between these spaces in fact sheds light on the interconnections in the organisation of work and life across them. In both nominal and substantive ways, the ‘stay at home’ policies have placed households at the centre of the governments’ response to the pandemic, which constitutes an acceleration of the long-term process of privatisation of social reproduction observed throughout neoliberal capitalism. At this stage of advanced neoliberal capitalism, households are already over-burdened with responsibilities for care and welfare provisioning, debt servicing and payments, albeit in unequal ways. How the COVID-19 crisis maps onto existing inequalities at the household level, both across households and within them, is a critical concern because the public and societal mechanisms through which redistribution can occur are severely broken.

In theory, this crisis has been indiscriminate in bringing care and social reproduction work back into the home. Gone is the option for wealthier households to outsource domestic and caring labour and public provision has been rolled back for everyone. While this is evidently flouted in a

² For example, in the UK the term ‘key worker’ has been revived and adapted to characterise those low-paid workers in essential health, care, public and social services as well as in food production and distribution. See <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/coronavirus-COVID-19-maintaining-educational-provision/guidance-for-schools-colleges-and-local-authorities-on-maintaining-educational-provision#critical-workers>

number of contexts, particularly where live-in domestic workers are the norm,³ in many dual-income families the COVID-19 crisis has brought with it a renegotiation of paid and unpaid work within the home. Evidence on the processes of renegotiation is limited so far; for example, in the context of Hungary, a survey of couples has revealed that men are taking up more domestic and care work in the household (Fodor et al., 2020). In the UK, time-use data indicates that fathers spent more time on ‘enjoyable’ childcare and mothers continued to be primarily responsible for childcare overall (WBG, 2020a).

The disease itself, the school closures and disruption in care homes and informal care networks intensify family responsibilities, but their exact impact is shaped by the type of household we live in. As feminist economists and anthropologists have for a long time argued (Guyer and Peters, 1987; Agarwal, 1997; Kabeer, 1998; Bargawi, 2020), the definition of a household varies dramatically both between and within countries and assessing the impact of the pandemic on social reproduction must take account of this. Overall, households with a greater number of children or older people needing care will inevitably be hit hardest. The closure of schools and childcare providers has meant that the differences between those with and without children are heightened. In general, those with caring responsibilities will experience a greater burden and lone-parent households are particularly exposed. On the other hand, larger families – more prevalent in the Global South and among ethnic minorities in the Global North – will face greater pressures in terms of living space and household finances. Indeed, households have elusive boundaries (Kandiyoti, 1999), and reproductive relations may transcend such boundaries in varied ways, leading to a greatly differentiated impact of COVID-19.

As households are becoming more differentiated in terms of asset ownership, particularly in Anglo-American economies (Adkins et al., 2019), household accumulation of wealth or liabilities, a highly racialised process (Taylor, 2019), is another critical element to assess the impacts of the pandemic. Asset-based inequality has manifested acutely in differentiated housing conditions, both in relation to home ownership but also in relation to the lack of availability and poor condition of social housing following years of under-investment (Robertson, 2017). The result has been the growth of the private rental sector where housing stock is equally poor, providing sub-standard accommodation and cramped living conditions. Providing care and completing domestic chores under these living conditions can be notably more difficult, time-consuming and stressful. The heightened indebtedness of households in many countries has exacerbated their choices of living conditions further and such indebtedness has bonded them to their work, no matter how dangerous or exposing to the virus.

In the context of a crisis where health and economic dimensions interact in complex ways, the nature of employment of household members is also crucial. Key workers are facing much bigger challenges in terms of their health risk, for both themselves and the people they live with, but also in the provision of care for the families and the ability to acquire food. The conditions of key workers make it clearer than ever that we cannot understand what happens in employment as

³ The COVID-19 crisis raises serious concerns for the protection and well-being of domestic workers; see for example this article in The Guardian <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/may/05/for-the-lives-of-our-mothers-COVID-19-sparks-fight-for-maids-rights-in-brazil-coronavirus> and this one on Aljazeera <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/domestic-workers-middle-east-risk-abuse-COVID-19-crisis-200404152201409.html>

detached from social reproduction – the starting point is to appreciate how these workers live in households that will shape their ability to go to work and their additional burdens in terms of care, domestic work and health risks. We will expand the analysis of global labour markets below, but it is important to highlight how household dynamics feed into the organisation of work outside the household and vice versa, an interconnection made starker by the health risks emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic, but always present.

Crucially, all changes to household dynamics need to be assessed in the short and long term, as some are structural and others temporary, brought about by specific emergency policies, such as lockdowns, which will eventually be lifted. Still, in their combined effect they have so far produced significant changes in the gendered division of labour inside the home, on household internal fragmentation and on the societal redistribution of social reproduction to households. In turn, these changes are also organically linked to profound transformations in the labour market, which have witnessed the rise and restructuring of multiple inequalities.

Inequalities in labour markets and broken supply chains

If the effects of COVID-19 on the household and the inequalities centred round it are substantial, its impact on the broader world of work is huge. In terms of the organisation of work, multiple forms of inequality interact to shape the differentiated, gendered and racialised impacts of the current crisis. Data from the UK clearly suggest that women and ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected by the crisis. Rather paradoxically, they also suggest that these categories are, at the same time, central to its resolution, given their over-representation among essential workers.

The Women's Budget Group (WBG) (2020b) has documented that 77 percent of healthcare workers are women and women also make up 77 percent of the high-risk workforce and a staggering 98 percent of high-risk workers in low-paid jobs, based on Autonomy's Jobs At Risk Index that assesses which workers are more at risk in terms of exposure to the disease and physical proximity to others.⁴ Although there is a paucity of data for other social groups, the Institute of Race Relations reports that many migrant workers are essential workers but none would be eligible to remain in the UK under the new government's immigration policy which defines those earning under £25,000 as low-skilled and unwanted (Webber, 2020).

Early figures from various countries show that Black, Asian, Latino and other ethnic minorities are disproportionately affected by COVID-19. In the UK, for example, nearly a third of people who are ill with COVID-19 are from ethnic minorities while constituting only 13 percent of the UK population. The British Medical Association states that this could be the result of existing health and social inequalities, ineffective government and public health communication to ethnic minority communities and higher rates of underlying health conditions amongst some of these groups. The crisis is showing how structural racism and the associated socio-economic inequalities place specific social groups in a position of compounded risk linked to their occupational status, lack of safety at work, mobility, living conditions and health (Banks, 2020).

In the Global South, the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on workers is triggering catastrophic effects. A huge percentage of workers are affected, in different, yet overlapping ways, on the basis

⁴ See data on Jobs at Risk Index (JARI) elaborated by Autonomy here <https://autonomy.work/portfolio/jari/>.

of their employment location. Global supply chains have been severely disrupted by the pandemic and the consequent global lockdown. UNCTAD (2020) states that so far the pandemic had a cost of \$50 billion in lost exports. Focusing on manufacturing, in the garment sector many retailers have tried to cancel future orders and even backtracked on those already placed. This is the case for the Arcadia Group, the company that operates Topshop, Topman and Miss Selfridges in the UK, for instance. According to the Worker Rights Consortium (WRC), a US labour rights group, Arcadia has cancelled well over £100m of orders across its global supply chains.⁵ Due to this, and to the enforcement of lockdowns around the world, millions of workers were forced home to rural areas, where many originally come from. In India, the closure of factories and plants in urban areas, many of which are linked to supply chain capitalism, has created a massive exodus of migrant workers towards villages of origin. This has happened also due to evictions in urban areas. On the other hand, in many industrial hamlets, the respect of social distancing measures would have not been possible, considering that several workers share tiny rooms located along the lines of the industrial ‘urban village’ (Cowan, 2018). In fact, the pandemic and the lockdowns have highlighted the hardship of social reproduction for the labouring poor. Having lost their employment and income, many workers were evicted from this urban village. As trains struggled to accommodate the footloose army of returning migrant workers trying to reach home, thousands and thousands of workers started a long march, aiming to reach on foot (Samaddar, 2020). This march has produced numerous casualties, with people dying trying to go back to their families. The lockdown itself is proven economically deadly for many, and it is leading to an upsurge in violence and discrimination based on caste or religion (see Al Dahdah et al, 2020).

Whilst more resilient than those operating in light manufacturing, also agro-food supply chains have significantly restructured during the crisis, depending on changes in demand for specific foods in consumer markets. The initial panic-buying behaviour of many, particularly in developed regions, created food-shortages and gaps in warehousing, shelving and delivery (see an account on Canada by Hobbs, 2020) which, in turn, had severe societal reproductive implications, leaving many essential workers struggling to access basic food items as they worked to ensure the regeneration of the economy and of life for the many stranded at home. A few months into the Global lockdown, we know that the disruption of global agriculture has been far more substantial. First, despite many more families experiencing micro-food crises – also due to the closure of food banks (e.g. in the UK)⁶ – many farmers have also struggled to sell their produce. In fact, second, reports from many countries worldwide confirm drastic falls in capacity due to the many thousands of workers who are unable to work in the fields, or who went back home, either voluntarily or due to retrenchment. In Italy, the enforcement of the lockdown on migrant workers have escalated lack of safety and hygiene in many ‘baraccopoli’ (industrial slum dwellings), which have risked becoming novel centres of the epidemic (Arquinigo Pardo, 2020). In the UK, shortages of migrant workers may result in agricultural produce being lost or wasted (Lindsay, 2020; Cook, 2020). In the US, the workers who are keeping the agro-food supply chains afloat cannot in turn afford to buy the food they grow (Orozco, 2020). In India, or parts of Africa, like Kenya, informal food markets have run empty for several weeks with severe implications for farmers’ incomes and

⁵ See Guardian article <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/apr/15/arcadia-group-cancels-over-100m-of-orders-as-garment-industry-faces-ruin>.

⁶ See Bulman’s article in the Independent <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/coronavirus-uk-food-banks-close-poverty-shortage-a9405351.html>.

people's access to food (Al Dahdah et al., 2020; Kinyanjui, 2020), and for food insecurity, particularly for migrants and women (Rao, 2020).

Finally, the impact of the lockdown on informal workers cannot be overstated. Accounting for over 68 percent of total employment in the Global South with peaks of over 80 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa and over 90 percent in India (ILO, 2018a), informal employment is highly precarious, contingent and often seasonal. Hardly reduced during the globalisation phase, informal employment makes workers particularly vulnerable when crises hit, condemning people to unemployment without any backup from a day to the next. Some informal workers, such as waste pickers, have continued to work facing heightened health risks.⁷ Unsurprisingly, given their undesirable nature, low payments and insecure working conditions, women, migrants and ethnic minorities have always been over-represented in the most precarious and poorly-paid informal occupations (Chen, 2007; Rao, 2020). This also means that these categories are those more likely to have suffered an immediate threat to their livelihood from the lockdown measures. Informal workers can be retrenched without warning, and they fall outside the remit of furlough and/or more structured welfare provisions, posing a number of challenging policy questions on how best to tackle the crisis of social reproduction which is escalating for the majority labouring on the planet during this pandemic.

4. Where next? A feminist internationalist response

It is clear that the outcomes of this crisis will be dire. The profound class, gender and race inequalities that mark our socio-economic systems are being exposed and exacerbated before our eyes. Many indirect and undesired impacts are also emerging. We know for example that during the Ebola outbreak resources for reproductive and sexual health were diverted to the emergency response, contributing to a rise in maternal mortality (Wenham et al., 2020). At the beginning of the epidemic in the UK, the Guardian reported that the shortage of midwives had doubled owing to the diversion of staff to COVID-19 response. Equally important, the household has clearly emerged as a place that *can* be of harm and violence, as long argued by feminists (Cavallero and Gago, 2020). Movement restrictions, loss of income, isolation, overcrowding, stress and anxiety (Chandan et al, 2020) have contributed to a surge in cases of domestic violence (including child abuse), although patriarchal relations are at the root of the epidemic of domestic abuse. While bearing in mind that radical intervention is needed to address these emerging forms of inequality and oppression, there is an opportunity in the realisation that social reproduction work is essential and therefore it can no longer be devalued. Thus, we conclude by mentioning four dimensions of an international feminist response. Macroeconomic packages are necessary, but we also need to delve deeper into what this crisis can teach us. Households need to be supported but cannot and should not do everything: the commodification, privatization and financialisation of social reproduction needs to be halted.

First, multi-levels and combined forces beyond the institution of the household should be brought back into the debate to develop a comprehensive and systemic strategy. By organizing a collective response through internationalist workers' movements, we, as society, need to revindicate the place that essential workers occupy in social reproduction, not only by replacing the rhetoric of

⁷ See this brief by Women in Informal Employment: Globalising and Organising (WIEGO) <https://www.wiego.org/waste-pickers-essential-service-providers-high-risk>

‘unskilled labour’ with a more dignifying classification of ‘key worker’, but also by putting forward the material and political claims attached to it, which entail pay rises, social protection, pensions, extended sick leave, parental leave and indefinite legal rights to citizenship for migrants. Internationalist responses of civil society and social movements – such as activists in trade unions, feminist and environmental groups, farmers’ organizations and pro-migration groups – are instrumental to contrast the inward and anachronistic nationalist responses seen so far and to work towards forms on international solidarity able to protect the most vulnerable across the world. At the local level, internationalist democratizations can operate through forms of community support, mutual aid groups and community organizing to share care and all forms of social reproduction.

Second, in the immediate term we need some form of income guarantee or basic income for all (Standing, 2020), especially migrants and informal workers in the Global South. For countries in the Global South this may mean using the currently available systems of cash transfers for poor families and moving towards a global universal basic income premised upon global redistribution (Castel-Branco, 2020) to make sure people do not fall into serious and irreversible destitution. From a feminist point of view, cash transfers could help alleviate women’s time devoted to domestic and time-intensive reproductive activities (Weeks and Cruz, 2016) while also addressing immediate financial needs for those who are unemployed, a proposal somewhat akin to the 1970s ‘Wages for Housework’ campaign (see Federici, 2012).

Third, however, if we really want to subvert gender, class and racial injustice, we need to admit that income transfers are not enough. Regardless of the material conditions they live in, women often engage with many forms of work which are fundamental for society but, by falling outside the market circuit, are informally retributed or not paid at all. Hence, in order to dismantle the political, cultural and economic constraints that condemn women in positions of subalternity in both the private and public sphere, we need to rethink and de-commodify the concept of work and what it means for the survival of the socio-economy.

Fourth, because COVID-19 has proven once again that work is a fluid concept that goes beyond the market, we need to rethink a care system which is public and not tied to employment per se. In the Global North, societal needs have been traditionally addressed by a centralized system of welfare provision managed by the state, which decades of austerity have dismantled. Welfare supports women: health, care and education are services that, in the absence of a public system of provision, are either bought in the market or unbearably subsidized by women’s reproductive and emotional work (Lombardozi, 2020). As discussed so far in the paper, the COVID-19 crisis has put an enormous strain on society, and a de-commodified system of basic services provision would hold the potential to address gender, race and class inequalities because it bypasses the market ideology that created the conditions for the disadvantaged and disempowered to have a barrier to access these services in the first place. Furthermore, it would overcome the concerns over the affordability of cash transfer and basic income programmes (Lombardozi and Pitts, 2019). Proposals on how ‘welfare in 2020’ would look like have started to appear. It is not surprising that such proposals are covering an increasing amount of aspects of social reproduction: from access to information to food, from housing to childcare, passing through education, legal support and health. All those needs should be treated as universal rights because fundamental to the reproduction of a healthy society, either re-funded or prioritized in countries that do not have it yet.

In conclusions, a social reproduction lens provides the analytical tools to assess the nature of the COVID-19 crisis, highlighting its dire effects on multiple inequalities reproduced in households and global labour markets. Unless we appreciate how this crisis is both threatening and re-charting the organisation of work and life across global economies and society, by giving renewed centrality to households while making social reproduction work starkly visible, we fail to both understand and respond to this crisis.

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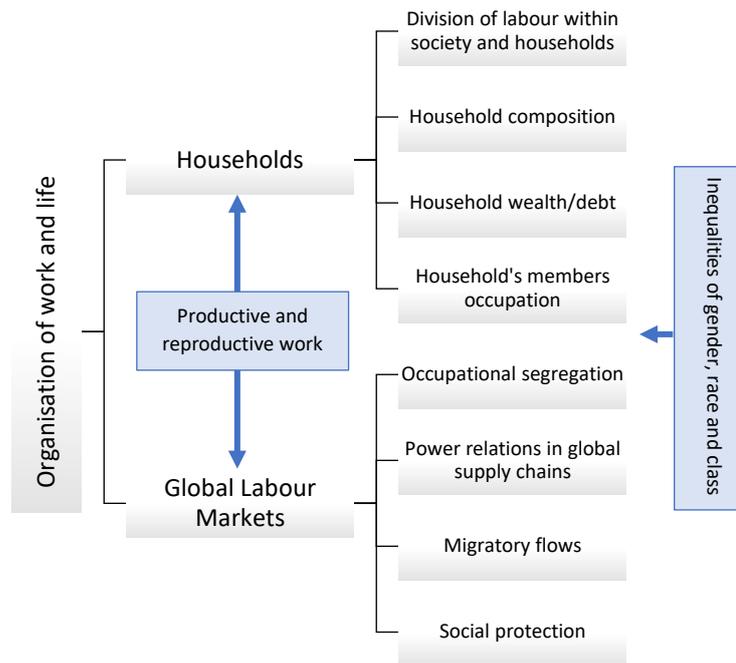
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Figure 1. A conceptual framework for Covid-19 as a crisis of productive and reproductive work



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