
SHIFTS IN FEMINIST DISCOURSES: INTERPRETATIONS, REIMAGININGS, AND CRITIQUES OF UNPAID AND CARE LABOUR

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolving feminist discourses on unpaid and care labour, a domain that has remained central to feminist theory and activism for decades. It traces the historical development of theoretical frameworks that make visible the social, economic, and political value of unpaid labour and care work, examining how these conceptualizations have shifted in response to changing global structures. Beginning with the second-wave feminist critiques that politicized housework and continued through the feminist engagements with neoliberal policy frameworks, the paper delineates how discourses around unpaid and care labour have been reimagined to address intersectionality, diverse cultural contexts, and alternative futures. The article also highlights more recent interventions, including ecofeminist and community-based perspectives, which expand our collective understanding of the relationship between labour, care, and social reproduction. By concluding with a reflection on transnational activism, policy discourses, and future directions, the article underscores the urgency of centering care as an ethical, political, and economic concern.

Keywords: Feminist approach, intersectionality, labor care, political and economic concern and social reproduction

1. INTRODUCTION

Feminist debates over unpaid and care labour have historically been significant arenas for understanding and contesting patriarchal and capitalist structures. The term “unpaid labour” encompasses a wide range of activities: domestic chores, childrearing, eldercare, and emotional labour that often remains invisible in formal economic calculations.¹ In many societies across the world, these responsibilities disproportionately fall upon women, thereby entrenching gender inequality.² Although feminist activism has challenged these disparities over the past several decades, the structures that systematically undervalue care continue to shift, requiring ongoing interrogations of the ideologies and material conditions that shape them.³

The question of unpaid and care labour is not solely about women’s oppression—it is also integral to broader social relations that connect gender, class, caste, race, sexuality, and nationality.⁴ Over the years, feminist analyses have evolved, incorporating new theoretical tools and political frameworks. Classical Marxist feminists, for instance, exposed the exploitative dimensions of housework within capitalist economies.⁵ Feminists of colour, on the other hand, called attention to the differentiated experiences of domestic labour and care across racial and ethnic lines.⁶ More recently, global, transnational, and postcolonial feminists have further complicated the conversation, highlighting how care work is outsourced and internationalized, thereby shedding light on the intersection of global inequalities and local norms.⁷

The purpose of this article is to provide a critical overview of shifts in feminist discourses, interpretations, reimaginings, and critiques of unpaid and care labour. Section 2 offers a historical backdrop of how feminist scholars conceptualized unpaid labour and the domestic realm, underscoring early debates that shaped the field. Section 3 traces the entry of “care” as a central category in feminist debates, discussing the pivotal scholarship that re-centered caring relations in both micro and macro analyses. Section 4 examines the intersections of race, class, caste, and nation in care discourses, highlighting key scholars who have expanded our

¹ Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* (Bristol: Falling Wall Press, 1975).

² Arlie R. Hochschild & Anne Machung, *The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home* (1989).

³ Nancy Fraser, *Contradictions of Capital and Care*, 100 *New Left Rev.* 99 (2016).

⁴ Joan Acker, *Hierarchies, Jobs, Bodies: A Theory of Gendered Organizations*, 4 *Gender & Soc’y* 139 (1990).

⁵ Mariarosa Dalla Costa & Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* (1972).

⁶ Angela Davis, *Women, Race & Class* (1981); bell hooks, *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984).

⁷ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work* (2001); Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003).

understanding of who performs care work and under what conditions. Section 5 engages with critiques of neoliberal policy frameworks, which have co-opted or depoliticized certain strands of feminist discourse on care. Section 6 focuses on transnational reimaginings of care and the new social movements that have challenged existing paradigms. Finally, Section 7 offers concluding reflections on future directions for feminist research and activism related to unpaid and care labour.

Throughout the article, I argue that the transformation of discourses on unpaid and care labour reflects not only an expansion of feminist theoretical horizons but also the changing conditions of globalization, migration, and neoliberal governance.⁸ Contemporary feminist scholarship and activism now recognize that a thorough critique of oppression must center on care as both a material activity and a political practice.⁹ While much has changed, the persistent undervaluation of care, the unequal distribution of household responsibilities, and the transnational commodification of domestic labour suggest that robust feminist interventions remain crucial.¹⁰

2. HISTORICAL DEBATES ON UNPAID LABOUR

2.1 The Domestic Sphere and Early Feminist Critiques

The persistent question of how household labour fits into broader capitalist modes of production has been a focal point for feminist scholarship. Early Marxist feminists in the 1960s and 1970s most notably Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Selma James (1972) argued that unpaid domestic labour was a hidden form of exploitation within capitalist societies, essential to reproducing the labour force yet unremunerated.¹¹ These scholars posited that women's domestic work was not only shaped by patriarchy but also by the capitalist imperative to reduce labour costs. In other words, by making women responsible for domestic tasks, capitalists effectively externalized the costs of reproduction to the private sphere.¹²

During the same era, socialist feminists like Heidi Hartmann (1979) highlighted the

⁸ Saskia Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents: Essays on the New Mobility of People and Money* (1998).

⁹ Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* (1993).

¹⁰ Bridget Anderson, *Doing the Dirty Work?: The Global Politics of Domestic Labour* (2000).

¹¹ Mariarosa Dalla Costa & Selma James, *The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community* 25–40 (Bristol: Falling Wall Press 1972).

¹² Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* 91–110 (2004).

intertwining of patriarchy and capitalism as dual systems.¹³ According to Hartmann, wage labour for men was sustained by a family structure in which women were primarily responsible for unpaid household activities. Thus, the domestic sphere was not “naturally” women’s domain but rather historically constructed to ensure the reproduction of male wage labour and the capitalist system that relied on it.¹⁴ These debates laid the groundwork for the notion that the household was a critical site of both labour and class struggle.

2.2 Wages for Housework and Its Legacies

One of the most radical and controversial campaigns of this period was “Wages for Housework,” initiated by feminist collectives in Italy, Britain, and the United States (Federici 1975). Proponents of this campaign demanded that the state recognize the socially necessary nature of reproductive labour by providing a wage for housework.¹⁵ This strategic demand aimed to expose the economic contributions that housewives made and denaturalize the assumption that domestic tasks were women’s “natural” calling. While the campaign did not achieve its direct goals, it prompted critical reflections on the connections between the state, patriarchy, and capitalism.¹⁶

The legacy of Wages for Housework reverberates in contemporary discussions about universal basic income and welfare reform.¹⁷ By insisting that domestic labour be viewed as labour, activists dismantled the dichotomy between “productive” and “reproductive” spheres. Their efforts set the stage for later feminist economists to incorporate the value of unpaid work into national and global accounting systems (e.g., through satellite accounts and time-use surveys).¹⁸

2.3 The Emergence of Household Economies in Development Discourse

By the 1980s, development agencies and international institutions started taking note of the contributions of women’s unpaid labour, particularly in the Global South.¹⁹ Scholars such as Diane Elson (1993) emphasized that women’s non-market activities were crucial for the

¹³ Heidi Hartmann, *The Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism: Towards a More Progressive Union*, 3 *Capital & Class* 1, 3–4 (1979).

¹⁴ Christine Delphy, *Close to Home: A Materialist Analysis of Women’s Oppression* 59–72 (1984).

¹⁵ Silvia Federici, *Wages Against Housework* 3–6 (Bristol: Power of Women Collective & Falling Wall Press 1975).

¹⁶ Id. at 10–14.

¹⁷ Leopoldina Fortunati, *The Arcane of Reproduction: Housework, Prostitution, Labor and Capital* 23–29 (Autonomedia 1995).

¹⁸ Kathi Weeks, *The Problem with Work: Feminism, Marxism, Antiwork Politics, and Postwork Imaginaries* 122–38 (2011).

¹⁹ Lourdes Benería, *Gender, Development, and Globalization: Economics as if All People Mattered* 102–15 (2016).

functioning of economies, especially where states did not provide robust social services.²⁰ The Women in Development (WID) and Gender and Development (GAD) approaches further underscored the importance of considering women's unpaid work in policy.²¹ However, critiques soon emerged from postcolonial feminists who argued that these development frameworks risked universalizing women's experiences and inadvertently reifying Western-centric assumptions about the family, gender roles, and "progress."²²

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, feminist scholarship on unpaid labour increasingly recognized the diversity of women's experiences across varying social contexts.²³ Nonetheless, the fundamental insight that housework and care activities were indispensable to capital and society remained a strong current uniting different theoretical strands.²⁴

3. CARE AS A CENTRAL CATEGORY IN FEMINIST THOUGHT

3.1 The Ethics of Care and Feminist Moral Philosophy

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, an additional theoretical framework emerged, often referred to as the "ethics of care." Spearheaded by Carol Gilligan (1982) and later expanded upon by Joan Tronto (1993), this line of argumentation shifted the focus from the invisibility of domestic labour to an exploration of care as a moral, ethical, and relational practice.²⁵ Instead of solely examining labour exploitation, care ethicists asked: *What does it mean to care for someone, and how does society value care work?*²⁶

The ethics of care perspective foregrounds interdependence, relationship-building, and empathy as fundamental aspects of human life.²⁷ Rather than considering individuals as isolated units, care ethicists argue that humans exist within networks of relationships that need ongoing maintenance.²⁸ From this viewpoint, social policies and institutions should be

²⁰ Caroline Moser, Gender Planning in the Third World: Meeting Practical and Strategic Gender Needs, 17 *World Dev.* 1799, 1802 (1989).

²¹ Diane Elson, Gender-Aware Analysis and Development Economics, 17 *J. Int'l Dev.* 1081, 1084 (1993).

²² Naila Kabeer, *Reversed Realities: Gender Hierarchies in Development Thought* 12–19 (1994).

²³ Nancy Folbre, *Who Pays for the Kids? Gender and the Structures of Constraint* 45–59 (1994).

²⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses, 30 *Boundary 2* 333, 335–38 (1984).

²⁵ Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development* 17–33 (1982).

²⁶ Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care* 3–15 (1993).

²⁷ Virginia Held, *The Ethics of Care: Personal, Political, and Global* 9–20 (2006).

²⁸ Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* 49–60 (1999).

evaluated on the extent to which they foster care, compassion, and connectedness.²⁹

3.2 Feminist Economics and Measuring Care

Parallel to the ethics of care scholarship, feminist economists began to systematically measure and theorize the macro-level effects of unpaid work. Marilyn Waring (1988), for instance, famously critiqued the United Nations System of National Accounts for excluding unpaid caring activities from GDP calculations, thereby rendering women's contributions invisible.³⁰ This exclusion had tangible policy implications, as it justified underinvestment in social services and reinforced a gendered division of labour.³¹

Subsequent work in feminist economics refined methods for quantifying unpaid labour, often through time-use surveys that tracked the hours spent on domestic chores and care work.³² Nancy Folbre (2001) contributed significantly to the economics of care by examining the “care penalty,” where those engaged in care-intensive sectors (predominantly women) often earn lower wages or forego earning capacity.³³ The notion of a “care deficit” also emerged, signifying how neoliberal restructuring and social service cutbacks placed added burdens on families and communities.³⁴ Feminist economists thus not only provided a language and methodology for assessing the value of unpaid work but also demonstrated how undervaluation contributes to systemic gender inequalities.³⁵

3.3 Social Reproduction Theory

Social reproduction theory integrated insights from Marxist feminism and feminist economics to emphasize how social structures are sustained over time. Scholars such as Lise Vogel (1983) and more recently Tithi Bhattacharya (2017) argue that capitalist production depends on the ongoing reproduction of labour power, which is carried out predominantly in the private sphere by women.³⁶ Social reproduction includes not just childbirth and childcare but also the provisioning of food, emotional support, and community building.³⁷ This theoretical

²⁹ Joan C. Tronto, *Beyond Gender Difference to a Theory of Care*, 12 *Signs* 644, 648–49 (1987).

³⁰ Marilyn Waring, *If Women Counted: A New Feminist Economics* 25–40 (1988).

³¹ *Id.* at 55–63.

³² Lourdes Benería, *Gender, Development, and Globalization: Economics as if All People Mattered* 87–90 (2016).

³³ Nancy Folbre, *The Invisible Heart: Economics and Family Values* 82–97 (2001).

³⁴ Nancy Folbre, *Measuring Care: Gender, Empowerment, and the Care Economy*, 14 *J. Hum. Dev.* 183, 186–88 (2013).

³⁵ Shahra Razavi, *The Political and Social Economy of Care in a Development Context*, Gender and Dev. Programme Paper No. 3, U.N. Research Inst. for Soc. Dev. (2007).

³⁶ Lise Vogel, *Marxism and the Oppression of Women: Toward a Unitary Theory* 123–39 (1983).

³⁷ Tithi Bhattacharya, *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentring Oppression* 5–8 (2017).

framework deepened our understanding of unpaid and care labour by situating it at the core of social and economic processes, rather than relegating it to a secondary position.

Importantly, social reproduction theory underscores that care labour, although primarily rendered by women, is also distributed along lines of class, race, caste, and migration status.³⁸ In a globalized world, the burden of social reproduction is often shifted from privileged women to marginalized women through market mechanisms such as paid domestic work, surrogacy, and eldercare services.³⁹ Thus, social reproduction theory illuminates the global care chains that link households across national and socioeconomic boundaries.⁴⁰

4. INTERSECTIONS: RACE, CLASS, CASTE, AND NATION

4.1 Feminists of Colour and the Politics of Domestic Work

While the early Marxist feminist debates provided a robust critique of capitalism, they often failed to attend to the racialized dimensions of unpaid labour. Feminists of colour, particularly in the United States, pointed out that women of colour had long carried out domestic and care work, both unpaid and underpaid, for white families. Angela Davis (1981) highlighted that Black women's experiences of housework had never been purely a "private" matter, as their labour was historically exploited under slavery and then devalued under Jim Crow segregation.⁴¹ The idea of "working for yourself at home" never applied neatly to Black women, many of whom were employed in other people's homes.⁴²

Patricia Hill Collins (2000) added further complexity by showing how domestic workers' mothering and caregiving labour shaped not only the economic well-being of their employers but also their own family structures.⁴³ These scholars underscored that care work cannot be understood solely through a gendered lens, as the racialized and class-based distributions of care responsibilities profoundly shape who does the care, for whom, and under what

³⁸ Silvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons* 93–102 (2018).

³⁹ Arlie R. Hochschild, Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value, in *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism* 130, 132–33 (Will Hutton & Anthony Giddens eds., 2000).

⁴⁰ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work* 51–72 (2001).

⁴¹ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class* 229–45 (1981).

⁴² Evelyn Nakano Glenn, *From Servitude to Service Work: Historical Continuities in the Racial Division of Paid Reproductive Labor*, 18 *Signs* 1, 4–7 (1992).

⁴³ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* 47–66 (2d ed. 2000).

conditions.⁴⁴

4.2 Caste-Based Dimensions of Care in South Asia

In South Asia, particularly in India, caste hierarchies intersect with gender and class to structure the allocation of care tasks. Domestic work has often been delegated to Dalit or lower-caste women, replicating social hierarchies within the household. Scholars like Sharmila Rege (1998) have argued that conventional feminist narratives of housework as “women’s oppression” do not easily capture the experiences of Dalit women, whose service to upper-caste households can be entwined with stigmatized forms of labour such as cleaning toilets.⁴⁵ The oppressive conditions of domestic labour are exacerbated by caste discrimination and the spatial segregation of labour.⁴⁶

Additionally, marriage and kinship patterns, which vary by caste, can influence the distribution of care responsibilities within extended families.⁴⁷ Feminist activists have noted that calls for recognizing women’s unpaid work must be attentive to the stratifications that exist among women themselves.⁴⁸ Hence, intersectional analyses are crucial for revealing the differentiated and often invisible burdens placed on marginalized women within a patriarchal society.⁴⁹

4.3 Transnational Migration and Global Care Chains

A significant body of research examines how global capitalist restructuring has impacted the organization of unpaid and paid care labour across national borders. Arlie Hochschild (2000) introduced the concept of “global care chains,” referring to the transnational transfer of care services from poorer to richer countries.⁵⁰ Migrant women from the Global South often leave their own children behind to care for children or elderly persons in the Global North, creating a chain of care deficits and surpluses that reflect global inequalities.⁵¹

In this arrangement, middle-class women in wealthy countries benefit from the labour of

⁴⁴ Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty* 17–25 (1997).

⁴⁵ Sharmila Rege, Dalit Women Talk Differently: A Critique of “Difference” and Towards a Dalit Feminist Standpoint Position, 33 *Econ. & Pol. Wkly.* WS39, WS41–43 (1998).

⁴⁶ Gopal Guru, Dalit Women Talk Differently, 23 *Econ. & Pol. Wkly.* WS41, WS42 (1995).

⁴⁷ Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question: Dalits and the Politics of Modern India* 172–78 (2009).

⁴⁸ Uma Chakravarti, *Gendering Caste: Through a Feminist Lens* 105–10 (2003).

⁴⁹ Nivedita Menon, *Seeing Like a Feminist* 58–62 (2012).

⁵⁰ Arlie R. Hochschild, Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value, in *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism* 130, 131–34 (Will Hutton & Anthony Giddens eds., 2000).

⁵¹ Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Migration and Domestic Work* 51–73 (2001).

migrant women, who in turn outsource their own care responsibilities to female relatives or lower-wage workers in their home countries.⁵² This layered delegation of care has significant emotional and economic consequences for all parties involved. It illustrates that any feminist account of unpaid and care labour must transcend national frameworks and account for the structural asymmetries shaped by global capitalism, immigration policies, and racialized labour markets.⁵³

5. CRITIQUES OF NEOLIBERAL FRAMEWORKS AND THE CO-OPTATION OF CARE

5.1 From Welfare State to Market Solutions

The late 20th and early 21st centuries witnessed the neoliberal restructuring of states and markets, which profoundly impacted care arrangements. Neoliberal ideology advocates for market-based solutions and reduced state intervention.⁵⁴ As welfare provisions were cut or privatized, families—disproportionately women shouldered additional care responsibilities.⁵⁵ Feminist critiques highlight that under neoliberalism, care is commodified for those who can pay and further devalued for those who cannot.⁵⁶ This dynamic places lower-income women and marginalized communities at a greater disadvantage.

For instance, structural adjustment programs in the Global South often reduced public spending on healthcare, education, and social services, effectively shifting the burden of caregiving onto households.⁵⁷ Feminists criticized international institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank for implementing policies that exacerbated gendered inequalities in care.⁵⁸ Women, already overrepresented in informal labour, found themselves increasingly squeezed between declining public services and precarious labour markets.⁵⁹

⁵² Nicola Yeates, Global Care Chains: Critical Reflections and Lines of Enquiry, 33 *Int'l Feminist J. Pol.* 369, 374–76 (2004).

⁵³ Helma Lutz, When Home Becomes Work: Domestic Work as an Ordinary Job in Germany?, in *Global Dimensions of Carework and Migration* 49, 50–53 (Helma Lutz ed., 2008).

⁵⁴ David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* 2–5 (2005).

⁵⁵ Nancy Fraser, Contradictions of Capital and Care, 100 *New Left Rev.* 99, 105–07 (2016).

⁵⁶ Isabella Bakker, Social Reproduction and the Constitution of a Gendered Political Economy, 70 *New Pol. Econ.* 541, 543–45 (2007).

⁵⁷ Gita Sen, Structural Adjustment Policies in Developing Countries: Implications for Women and Children, 19 *Health Pol. & Plan.* 56, 58–59 (1990).

⁵⁸ Diane Elson, Structural Adjustment: Its Effects on Women, 23 *World Dev.* 1825, 1826–27 (1995).

⁵⁹ Lourdes Benería, Structural Adjustment, the Labour Market and the Household: The Case of Mexico, in *Unequal Burden: Economic Crises, Persistent Poverty, and Women's Work* 83, 87–90 (Lourdes Benería & Shelley Feldman eds., 1992).

5.2 Social Entrepreneurship and the Depoliticization of Care

Neoliberal governance also facilitated the rise of social entrepreneurship and microfinance programs targeting women. While these initiatives often claim to empower women, critics argue that they individualize and depoliticize structural problems of care.⁶⁰ Women entrepreneurs, for example, may be expected to expand their market-based activities without a commensurate reduction in domestic obligations or systemic support.⁶¹ Care becomes a site for market innovation rather than a collective responsibility requiring public investment.

Aihwa Ong (2006) uses the concept of “graduated sovereignty” to describe how neoliberal governance strategies fragment populations, granting certain groups more autonomy and resources than others.⁶² Within this fragmented landscape, care often becomes a terrain where marginalized groups are encouraged to undertake “self-help” projects.⁶³ Such initiatives can reinforce existing inequalities if they do not challenge the structural inequities that underlie the care economy.⁶⁴

5.3 State Policies: Conditional Cash Transfers and Workfare

Some governments have introduced conditional cash transfer (CCT) programs, such as Bolsa Família in Brazil or Oportunidades (Prospera) in Mexico, which provide money to low-income families—usually mothers—on the condition that they meet certain obligations (e.g., sending children to school, regular health check-ups).⁶⁵ These programs have been praised for reducing immediate poverty and improving educational outcomes, yet feminist scholars question whether they transform the gendered allocation of care responsibilities.⁶⁶ Instead, CCTs may reinforce the idea that women are the “natural” caregivers responsible for meeting the state’s social reproduction obligations, thus leaving structural barriers unaddressed.⁶⁷

⁶⁰ Naila Kabeer, *Is Microfinance a ‘Magic Bullet’ for Women’s Empowerment? Analysis of Findings from South Asia*, 13 *Econ. & Pol. Wkly.* 4709, 4710–12 (2005).

⁶¹ Maxine Molyneux, *Mothers at the Service of the New Poverty Agenda: Progres/Oportunidades, Mexico’s Conditional Transfer Programme*, 40 *Soc. Pol.* 425, 426–28 (2006).

⁶² Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* 75–78 (2006).

⁶³ *Id.* at 98–100.

⁶⁴ Sylvia Chant, *The ‘Feminisation of Poverty’ and the ‘Feminisation’ of Anti-Poverty Programmes: Room for Revision?*, 44 *J. Dev. Stud.* 165, 172–74 (2008).

⁶⁵ Fábio Veras Soares & Rafael Perez Ribas, *Targeting and Coverage of the Bolsa Familia Programme: Why Knowing What You Measure Is Important in Choosing the Numbers* 5–8 (Int’l Pol’y Centre for Inclusive Growth Working Paper No. 71, 2010).

⁶⁶ Maxine Molyneux, *Conditional Cash Transfers: A Pathway to Women’s Empowerment?*, 40 *IDS Bull.* 1, 2–4 (2009).

⁶⁷ Shahra Razavi, *The Political and Social Economy of Care in a Development Context*, Gender and Dev. Programme Paper No. 3, U.N. Research Inst. for Soc. Dev. 24–27 (2007).

Similarly, workfare programs in both the Global North and Global South push individuals to enter the labour market as a prerequisite for receiving social assistance.⁶⁸ Critics argue that such programs implicitly rely on the availability of unpaid or underpaid care work at home,⁶⁹ which is assumed to be handled by women. Policies framed under neoliberal logics often overlook the complexities of care labour and the multidimensional constraints faced by caregiving households.⁷⁰

6. REIMAGINING'S AND NEW DIRECTIONS

6.1 Ecofeminist Perspectives on Care and Sustainability

Ecofeminist perspectives have reinvigorated discussions on care by linking care for humans with care for the environment. Scholars such as Vandana Shiva (1988) and Maria Mies (1998) argue that dominant development paradigms, driven by capitalist imperatives, exploit both women's labour and natural resources.⁷¹ Ecofeminists posit that an ethic of care must extend to the non-human world, recognizing that sustaining human life requires sustainable ecosystems.⁷²

This approach challenges the strict separation of production and reproduction by foregrounding ecological reproduction as equally vital.⁷³ The concept of *subsistence perspective* advanced by Mies and Bennholdt-Thomsen (1999) advocates for reclaiming local, community-based forms of production and care as alternatives to the destructive cycles of global capitalism.⁷⁴ By centering care in all its forms—human, environmental, communal—eco-feminist frameworks open up possibilities for rethinking economic systems that do not rely on the exploitation of either labour or nature.⁷⁵

6.2 Community Care and Mutual Aid

Grassroots movements around mutual aid and community care have grown considerably, especially in moments of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Mutual aid initiatives often

⁶⁸ Jamie Peck, *Workfare States* 13–19 (2001).

⁶⁹ Ruth Lister, *Citizenship: Feminist Perspectives* 127–32 (2d ed. 2003).

⁷⁰ Mimi Abramovitz, Women and the Poor Laws in the 20th Century, 7 *Soc. Serv. Rev.* 9, 12–14 (2001).

⁷¹ Vandana Shiva, *Staying Alive: Women, Ecology, and Development* 45–52 (1988).

⁷² Maria Mies, *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale: Women in the International Division of Labour* 210–13 (1998).

⁷³ Ariel Salleh, *Ecofeminism as Politics: Nature, Marx, and the Postmodern* 86–90 (1997).

⁷⁴ Maria Mies & Veronika Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy* 28–34 (1999).

⁷⁵ Vandana Shiva & Maria Mies, *Ecofeminism* 12–15 (1993).

operate outside state or market structures, relying on collective efforts to share resources, provide childcare, deliver food, and tend to the sick. While not always explicitly feminist, these grassroots movements resonate with feminist theories that treat care as an essential social function.⁷⁶

Community care practices question individualized and privatized notions of caregiving by fostering solidarity economies, where care is a shared responsibility rather than a burden on individual households.⁷⁷ In some contexts, these initiatives intersect with broader political struggles, such as housing rights, anti-racism, and environmental justice, thereby situating care within a broader praxis of social transformation.⁷⁸

6.3 Transnational Feminist Networks and Policy Interventions

Transnational feminist networks have also emerged, forging alliances between activists across national boundaries to address care deficits and injustices. Movements like the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) exemplify how transnational organizing can yield political gains, such as the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Convention No. 189, which sets labour standards for domestic workers.⁷⁹ While such conventions are not always fully implemented at the national level, they signal an important shift in acknowledging the dignity and rights of care workers.⁸⁰

Moreover, transnational feminists have targeted global governance forums, including the United Nations, to push for broader recognition of unpaid labour and stronger social policies. Building on the momentum of the Beijing Platform for Action (1995), activists continue to demand that governments integrate care into social protection systems and national development agendas.⁸¹ These global policy arenas remain contentious battlegrounds, where feminist scholars and activists seek to ensure that care remains a central policy concern rather than a peripheral add-on.⁸²

⁷⁶ Dean Spade, *Mutual Aid: Building Solidarity During This Crisis (and the Next)* 5–12 (2020).

⁷⁷ Silvia Federici, *Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*, in *The Commoner* 1, 3–7 (2004).

⁷⁸ Juliet Schor, *After the Gig: How the Sharing Economy Got Hijacked and How to Win It Back* 77–82 (2020).

⁷⁹ Angela Mitropoulos, *Contract and Contagion: From Biopolitics to Oikonomia* 141–46 (2012).

⁸⁰ International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), *About Us*, <https://idwfed.org> (last visited Aug. 18, 2025).

⁸¹ Int'l Labour Org. (ILO), *Convention Concerning Decent Work for Domestic Workers* (Convention No. 189), June 16, 2011, 2955 U.N.T.S. 127.

⁸² United Nations, *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action*, U.N. Doc. A/CONF.177/20/Rev.1 (1995).

6.4 Digital Platforms and Platformization of Care

Recent technological innovations have introduced new forms of organizing care labour—sometimes referred to as the “platformization” of care. Apps and online platforms for domestic and care services have proliferated, promising greater efficiencies and more flexible arrangements. While some argue that these platforms can empower care workers by providing more direct access to clients, others caution that they can reproduce precarious working conditions.⁸³ As with gig work in other sectors, algorithmic management may undermine labour protections, obscure accountability, and intensify surveillance.⁸⁴

Feminist scholars studying digital labour call attention to how platform economies reshape domestic work.⁸⁵ The lines between the public and private spheres become blurred as home-based tasks are subject to platform-mediated transactions. For some, this may provide short-term income; for others, it perpetuates a cycle of low-wage, insecure labour that lacks the benefits or stability associated with formal employment. The rise of digital care platforms underscores the need for continued feminist advocacy and policy interventions to protect workers in these new gig spaces.⁸⁶

7. CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The landscape of feminist discourses on unpaid and care labour has undergone significant transformations over the past decades. Initially, second-wave Marxist feminists foregrounded housework as a site of exploitation hidden within the capitalist mode of production. Subsequent interventions, including the Wages for Housework campaign and feminist economics, provided analytical and political tools to expose the pivotal yet undervalued role of domestic labour in sustaining economies. Scholars advanced our understanding further by incorporating ethics of care perspectives, intersectional analyses, and critiques of neoliberal governance, thereby enriching the conceptual frameworks to address a wide array of social, economic, and political dimensions.

As the discourses evolved, they began to grapple more fully with racial, caste-based, and

^a Id.

⁸⁴ Juliet Schor & Connor Fitzmaurice, *The Sharing Economy: Labor, Inequality, and Social Connection on For-Profit Platforms*, 10 *Sociology Compass* 1, 3–6 (2016).

⁸⁵ Ursula Huws, *Labor in the Global Digital Economy: The Cybertariat Comes of Age* 112–15 (2014).

⁸⁶ Veena Dubal, *The Drive to Precarity: A Political History of Work, Regulation, & Labor Advocacy in San Francisco's Taxi & Uber Economies*, 38 *Berkeley J. Emp. & Lab. L.* 73, 118–21 (2017).

transnational inequalities. Intersectional and postcolonial feminists widened the lens, revealing how care labour is distributed unevenly across social hierarchies. The phenomenon of global care chains, in particular, highlights the need to see care as a global concern, bound up with migration regimes, financialization, and multinational exploitation. Reimaginings of care, from ecofeminist critiques to community-based mutual aid networks, further challenge the idea that care is merely an individual, private responsibility. Instead, they articulate radical visions of social and ecological well-being, urging us to incorporate care as a foundational principle in rethinking economic and political structures.

Despite these advances in theory and practice, the fundamental issue persists: the systematic undervaluation of care. Even as more women enter the formal workforce, households and communities remain overwhelmed by the rising demands of unpaid care, especially in the face of austerity measures, climate crises, and global pandemics. Indeed, the COVID-19 pandemic has starkly exposed the fragility of healthcare systems and the essential nature of caregiving, fueling renewed calls for robust, well-funded social infrastructure. Yet, such calls often clash with entrenched neoliberal ideologies that prioritize profit over collective well-being.

Moving forward, feminist research and activism on unpaid and care labour must address several key areas:

1. **Policy Innovations and State Responsibility:** There is a growing consensus among feminists that the state must assume a more substantial role in supporting care. This could involve universal basic services (e.g., free childcare, eldercare, healthcare), living wages for care workers, and robust social security systems that protect all caregivers—paid or unpaid. The challenge lies in compelling governments to commit to transformative policy changes rather than piecemeal reforms.
2. **Intersectional and Decolonial Praxis:** Future research must further advance intersectional methods and decolonial critiques, ensuring that feminist scholarship does not reproduce the very inequalities it seeks to eradicate. Regional and local contexts demand nuanced approaches, as care is culturally mediated and shaped by historical power relations.
3. **Technological Shifts and Labour Protections:** As digital platforms and automation continue to evolve, care work may increasingly rely on precarious gig economies or

new forms of remote care. Feminist interventions will need to advocate for fair labour protections, data privacy, and mechanisms that preserve workers' agency and well-being in these new digital environments.

4. **Ecological Imperatives and Sustainability:** The climate crisis intensifies vulnerabilities in the care economy. Extreme weather events, migrations, and resource scarcity place additional burdens on care networks. Incorporating environmental sustainability into feminist analyses of social reproduction is essential to envisioning equitable future worlds.
5. **Cultural Shifts and Shared Responsibility:** Beyond institutional and policy measures, a cultural transformation in how societies view care is paramount. Feminists have long argued that the gendered stigma attached to care must be dismantled, replaced by collective values that recognize caregiving as both dignified and indispensable. Educational curricula, media representations, and workplace norms all have roles to play in reshaping cultural attitudes.

In conclusion, feminist engagements with unpaid and care labour have opened up crucial avenues for understanding how economies are sustained and how inequalities are reproduced and resisted. These discourses continue to shape public debates, inform policy development, and inspire social movements. As neoliberal globalization, climate change, and technological shifts reshape our world, the need for robust, intersectional feminist approaches to care remains as urgent as ever. Care is not simply an appendage to economic life; it is its foundation. Recognizing and elevating the value of care—whether in households, communities, or ecosystems—can be a pivotal step toward creating more just, inclusive, and sustainable societies.

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