

Transforming Work: Feminist perspectives on the COVID-19 crisis and recovery*

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Abstract

This paper examines social and economic disparities surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic within the context of neoliberal capitalism. The gendered, racialized, and other social inequities that were evident during this health crisis are linked to shifting work conditions and activities of labor and capital within the workplace and at the household level. The analysis draws from feminist economic geography to examine the social dimensions, spatial dynamics, and economic processes that are highlighted by changes in work and social relations during and beyond the COVID-19 pandemic. The discussion demonstrates how economic upheavals such as those that occurred alongside the pandemic are embedded in social reproduction, with particular emphasis on the precarity of labor and contested household dynamics. Furthermore, ongoing crises in neoliberal capitalism provide the conditions for social movements that challenge inequities and oppressive conditions for labor. The conclusion offers strategies for future directions of work that support inclusive and transformative ideals of feminist economic geography.

Keywords: social reproduction; feminist economic geography; COVID-19 pandemic; gender and work

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Resum. *Transformar el treball: visions feministes sobre la crisi i la recuperació de la COVID-19*

Aquest article examina les desigualtats socials i econòmiques al voltant de la pandèmia de COVID-19 en el context del capitalisme neoliberal. Les desigualtats de gènere, racials i altres desigualtats socials, les quals s'han evidenciat durant aquesta crisi sanitària, estan relacionades amb els canvis en les condicions del treball i del capital en el lloc de treball i a la llar. L'anàlisi es basa en la geografia econòmica feminista per examinar les dimensions socials, les dinàmiques espacials i els processos econòmics que es reflecteixen a través de canvis en el treball i en les relacions socials durant la pandèmia de COVID-19 i més enllà. La discussió demostra que les turbulències econòmiques com les que s'han esdevingut durant la pandèmia estan integrades en la reproducció social, concretament en la precarietat del treball i les relacions de gènere a la llar. A més, les crisis actuals del capitalisme neoliberal afavoreixen els moviments socials que desafien les desigualtats i les condicions de treball opressives. La conclusió presenta estratègies per a les futures direccions del treball, associades als ideals inclusius i transformadors de la geografia econòmica feminista.

Paraules clau: reproducció social; geografia econòmica feminista; pandèmia de COVID-19; gènere i treball

Resumen. *Transformar el trabajo: visiones feministas sobre la crisis y la recuperación de la COVID-19*

Este artículo examina las desigualdades sociales y económicas alrededor de la pandemia de COVID-19 en el contexto del capitalismo neoliberal. Las desigualdades de género, raciales y otras desigualdades sociales, las cuales se han evidenciado durante esta crisis sanitaria, están relacionadas con los cambios en las condiciones del trabajo y del capital en el lugar de trabajo y en el hogar. El análisis se basa en la geografía económica feminista para examinar las dimensiones sociales, las dinámicas espaciales y los procesos económicos que se reflejan a través de cambios en el trabajo y en las relaciones sociales durante la pandemia de COVID-19 y más allá. La discusión demuestra que las turbulencias económicas, como las que han tenido lugar durante la pandemia, están integradas en la reproducción social, concretamente en la precariedad del trabajo y las relaciones de género en el hogar. Además, las crisis actuales del capitalismo neoliberal favorecen los movimientos sociales que desafían las desigualdades y las condiciones de trabajo opresivas. La conclusión presenta estrategias para las futuras direcciones del trabajo, asociadas a los ideales inclusivos y transformadores de la geografía económica feminista.

Palabras clave: reproducción social; geografía económica feminista; pandemia de COVID-19; género y trabajo

Résumé. *Transformer le travail: Perspectives féministes sur la crise et le reprise du COVID-19*

Cet article examine les disparités sociales et économiques entourant la pandémie de COVID-19 dans le contexte du capitalisme néolibéral. Les inégalités sociales liées au sexe, à la race et à d'autres facteurs qui se sont manifestées pendant cette crise sanitaire sont liées à l'évolution des conditions de travail et des activités du travail et du capital sur le lieu de travail et au niveau des ménages. L'analyse s'appuie sur la géographie économique féministe pour examiner les dimensions sociales, les dynamiques spatiales et les processus économiques mis en évidence par les changements dans le travail et les relations sociales pendant et après la pandémie de COVID-19. La discussion montre comment les bouleversements économiques tels que ceux qui se sont produits pendant la pandémie sont ancrés dans la reproduction sociale, en mettant particulièrement l'accent sur la précarité du travail et

la dynamique contestée des ménages. En outre, les crises actuelles du capitalisme néolibéral créent les conditions nécessaires aux mouvements sociaux qui contestent les inégalités et les conditions oppressives du travail. La conclusion propose des stratégies pour les orientations futures du travail qui soutiennent les idéaux inclusifs et transformateurs de la géographie économique féministe.

Mots-clés : reproduction sociale ; géographie économique féministe ; pandémie de COVID-19 ; genre et travail

Summary

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1. Introduction

Economic and social upheavals that arose during the COVID-19 global health pandemic have transformed the spaces, processes and power relations of work. Many of these socio-economic transformations redefine our notions of work and employment within and among workplaces, households, communities and broader society. In some cases, people shifted to working at home, navigating virtual environments and the competing demands of employment and household labor (Manzo and Minello, 2020). In other cases, employees were required to work in person as so-called 'essential workers' in sectors such as healthcare, food service and transportation, where they faced precarious and high-risk conditions (Loustaunau et al., 2021; Kim and Naylor, 2022).

Nearly all of these pandemic-led shifts in the workplace and the domestic sphere exposed gendered, racialized, and other social inequities. For example, job loss during the pandemic affected women in greater numbers than men (ILO, 2020). Additionally, women and people of color are overrepresented in the high-risk healthcare industry, including home health aides and nurses (Bahn et al., 2020). As the severity of the pandemic decreases, women are returning to work in lower proportions than men, partly due to household and caretaking responsibilities (IWPR, 2022). In general, transformations in the socio-economic and spatial dimensions of work that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic upended many of our expectations and experiences of work. These changes also highlight inequities in the gendered, racialized and class-based nature of labor, which, in turn, shape future strategies and directions of work in a (post-)pandemic world.

The discussion draws from feminist economic geography to examine the unfolding dimensions and meanings of work, especially during the recent

period of upheaval and change that were manifest during the global COVID-19 pandemic. This approach offers a comprehensive analysis of the dynamic and contested spaces and activities that sustain individuals, households and communities. It also advances our understanding of difference, embodiment and power in both the productive and reproductive spheres of labor (Werner et al., 2017; Huang and Tan, 2020; Macleavy et al., 2016). In short, this paper examines the spaces, social identities and transformative outcomes that are related to social reproduction and precarious work within the ongoing crises of neoliberal capitalism, such as those that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Feminist political economy, a key component of this approach, demonstrates how competition and alienation in the labor force and workplaces stem from patriarchal, heteronormative and racialized hierarchies and divisions (Bonds, 2013; Werner et al., 2017; Meehan and Strauss, 2015; McDowell, 2009). It also offers a critical exploration of the rich and dynamic trajectory of economic and labor geography's engagement with the diverse scales, identities and power relations of work (Oberhauser, 2000). Moreover, analyses of future directions of work entail an examination of the constraints, but also the opportunities, of transformative social relations within diverse global contexts. In short, feminist geographies of the economy and labor provide an effective platform for further discussions about the embeddedness of gendered, classed and racialized bodies, social roles and relational dimensions in the workplace and among labor (MacLeavy et al., 2016; Loomis and Oberhauser, 2020).

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, Indian scholar and activist Arundhati Roy (2020) wrote about the growing divides and crimes against humanity that arose alongside deepening crises of neoliberal capitalism, especially in India. So-called essential workers faced serious challenges as the Indian economy slowed, leaving thousands of workers stranded or struggling to return home under dire circumstances. Roy's critical assessment of this crisis is insightful, and sheds humanitarian light on the existential struggles many faced in the context of the global pandemic. Their approach is relevant to this analysis by emphasizing the need for mobilization and critical analyses to expose the gender, racial and political injustices of the pandemic.

The paper is organized into six sections that address the relevance of feminist economic geography in the current (post-)pandemic period. The approaches presented in the second section are based on social reproduction as a conceptual framework and methodology within feminist economic geography. The third section shifts to specific themes of precarity and care labor that also relate to global dimensions of capital mobility and migrant labor. The gendered, racialized and class-based dimensions of work are especially relevant to this discussion. The fourth section focuses on feminist economic geography's analysis of capitalist economic crises, and specifically social and economic shifts within the context of the global COVID-19 pandemic. I emphasize four dimensions of this crisis: economic activities, labor mobility, household dynamics and generational impacts during the pandemic. The fifth section includes

a discussion of the future of work, with specific reference to feminist analyses of the gig economy, digital platforms and the informal “sharing” economy. In the concluding section, I outline strategic measures and directions that build a transformative and more socially-just workplace and labor experience.

2. Social reproduction – navigating life’s work

This discussion examines social reproduction as the basis for analyzing the underlying connections and dynamics among productive and reproductive spheres during the global health crisis. Feminist perspectives on the economy and labor are key to understanding social reproduction, or what Mitchell et al. (2004) call “life’s work”. This analytical lens is helpful to deconstruct and critically examine socio-economic upheavals and disparities created by and exposed during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Early scholarship on social reproduction drew from Marxist and political economy work on domestic labor and the household, gender divisions of labor and the value of labor under capitalism (Mezzadri, 2021; Katz, 2001; McDowell, 2015). Winders and Smith (2019) refer to these and related concepts in their analysis of the dominant imaginaries of feminist work on social reproduction. According to Strauss and Meehan (2015: 1), social reproduction is a “framework for examining the interaction of paid labor and unpaid work in reproduction of bodies, households, communities, societies and environments, and the ways in which these activities are organized to support – or undermine – human flourishing.” This framework addresses the structural dimensions of economic and social power dynamics that account for the unequal distribution of conditions, capital and resources referred to below.

Feminist geography also examines how social reproduction is profoundly spatial within the context of capitalist power relations (MacLeavy et al., 2016; Werner et al., 2017). These spatial dimensions of the economy shape and are constitutive of intersectional social relations that include gender, racialization, sexuality and other unequal power dynamics (Mollett and Faria, 2018; Bonds, 2013). Intersectional identity formations are linked to individual subjectivities that affect the value attributed to labor in both capitalist and non-capitalist activities and meanings (Strauss and Meehan, 2015).

The theoretical framework of social reproduction challenges binary perspectives on production and reproduction that are reflected in notions of the economy as part of the public sphere, and social reproduction confined to the domestic sphere (Mezzadri, 2021; Meehan and Strauss, 2015). In contrast, a non-binary and relational approach to social reproduction makes fluid connections across scales and among social and economic spaces. This comprehensive vision of feminist economic geography includes work as sustenance, and livelihoods that are developed through social reproduction and relational dynamics. Bonds (2013: 405) states that relationality is “the idea that identities and spaces do not exist as entities in and of themselves but are instead constituted through engagement and interconnection.” Relationality thus informs

our understanding of households, workplaces and institutions in society, as well as the spaces and social dimensions of “life’s work”.

Likewise, the methodological approach to this project includes a comprehensive review of the extensive literature in feminist economic geography, and specifically more recent analyses of the COVID-19 pandemic. I identify the corresponding themes and situations that have arisen over the past several years that highlight the importance of social reproduction in viewing inequities and disparities within the workplace and across different segments of labor. In addition, the analysis draws from popular accounts and representations of gendered effects of the pandemic (Shashikant, 2020). This approach is grounded in feminist economic geography as a lens to situate social reproduction in the lived experience of work at multiple scales.

Disruption of economic activities during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic reverberated throughout society, affecting not only workplaces, but often overlooked household and community economic strategies. Manzo and Minello (2020) and others (Cockayne, 2021; Reuschke and Felstead, 2020; Bahn et al., 2020) examine the negative impact of the pandemic lockdown on gendered household responsibilities. Their work demonstrates how women were often responsible for increasing domestic labor, thereby exacerbating gender inequality in the domestic sphere. Feminist analyses of the background to and outcomes of these shifts are helpful in understanding the workplace, household and embodied aspects of economic upheaval brought about by this global health pandemic. In sum, social reproduction is impacted by and shapes people’s experiences of the pandemic. The following section outlines feminist economic geography’s conceptualization of precarious labor, and how it is linked to certain aspects of neoliberal capitalism that were exacerbated by the pandemic.

3. The pandemic, precarity and care labor

The status and security of labor is constantly being negotiated and contested under neoliberal capitalism. These dynamics are manifest in pressures from changing labor relations, workplace practices and globalization (Mullings, 2009; Huang and Tan, 2020; Werner et al., 2017). Labor and worker relations, for example, engage in negotiation over compensation, job security and advancement, among other things. Feminist analyses focus on precarity as a constant condition of many laborers, marked by insecure, untenable and exploitative working conditions (Miraftab, 2016; Strauss, 2020). Given this tenuous aspect of work, Meehan and Strauss (2015: 1) define precarious as a means of establishing and labelling “work” activities and roles, alongside the notion of precarity as the ontological condition of work.

The precarity of labor also relates to what Gibson-Graham (2008) describe as non-capitalist work, or informal, unpaid, household/reproductive and barter economies. Their work on diverse economies provides important perspectives on alternative forms and spaces of work and economic activities. Similar to the

notion of precarious work, these practices are built on poststructuralism and queer theory, with fluid and diverse non-capitalist forms of labor and work. As noted below, many of these alternative work practices increased during the pandemic, as some labor conditions became more informal and less structured. The dominant hegemonic masculine power relations and approaches under neoliberal capitalism tend to ignore these experiences and aspects of work and economic activities, and thus fail to account for them during periods of crisis.

In addition, feminist analyses of the contextual aspects and social relations underlying the expanding globalization of neoliberal capitalism inform our understanding of global dimensions of precarious labor (Mirchandani et al., 2019; Mullings, 2009; Silvey and Parreñas, 2019). Contemporary analyses of precarity on a global scale include a focus on employment in online platforms, back-office work and support services (Ettlinger, 2017; Mullings, 1999). For example, Ettlinger (2017) examines asymmetrical power relations among workers who face precarious conditions in online work platforms, in both developed and developing countries. Related studies provide rich analyses of the gendered nature of labor, which has grown through the global reach of online work. Mirchandani et al.'s (2019) research examines gender dynamics among low wage labor in the high-tech sector in India, highlighting support services such as cleaning, transportation drivers and security guards. Many of these studies focus on the precarious and exploitative nature of this integration of labor into the global economy, with low wages, harsh and stressful working conditions and lack of security in work. These and other social dimensions of the economic crisis that were exacerbated during the global pandemic are examined in more detail below.

3.1. Embodied, intimate and care labor

Feminist approaches to the economy and social reproduction emphasize the importance of living bodies and how work is embodied with emotions, desires, needs and identities (McDowell, 2009). The scale and social construction of the body has been widely studied, and relates to what Katz (2001) describes as the “messiness of work”. Moreover, social identities are assigned and become lived experiences as part of the embodiment of social reproduction. In many cases, mainstream approaches to economic geography fall within rigid structures and parameters of cis heteronormative, able-bodied and racialized expectations and norms. In contrast, feminist economic geography examines the embodiment of work and labor dynamics that are built on socially constructed dimensions of race, gender, sexuality, age, immigration status, disability and class (Bonds, 2013; Reid-Musson et al., 2020; McDowell, 2015; Strauss, 2020). These analyses of embodied labor are relevant to the narratives examined below regarding the role of power relations and social identities in transforming work during the pandemic.

Attention to the body is also connected to care labor. Feminist geographers address the critical role of care in analyzing how labor is performed and

constructed in the economy (Lawson, 2007; England, 2010; Henry, 2018). In particular, England (2010) examines care labor in the context of reproductive home healthcare, while Henry (2015) explores the under-valued nature of care labor in the health industry. These analyses are especially relevant given the widespread disinvestment in the care and health sectors under neoliberal capitalism. Bartos (2019) also provides a critical look at care labor as an extension of white masculine hegemony that further reinforces uneven power relations. In the European Union, employment is highly gendered (Figure 1), with more women in precarious and high-risk jobs (EU Reporter, 2021). In particular, women are more likely to be in service sectors such as childcare, retail and hospitality than men. Many women also work in the informal economy, where they lack rights and protection, and have minimal access to healthcare and other employment benefits. These circumstances put them in increasingly precarious situations following the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figure 1. Infographic on women’s care labor and informal work in Europe



Source: EU Reporter (2021).

On a global scale, Hochschild's (2000) widely-acclaimed work on "global care chains" addresses the (under)world of this form of "emotional" labor of domestic and reproductive labor, linking the global North and South. Immigrant labor and the overall mobility of labor in this type of work is highlighted in case studies by Yeoh and Ramdas (2014) and Silvey and Parreñas (2019). They demonstrate how these dynamic labor conditions are embedded in global forces and institutions of neoliberal capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism and racialized state institutions.

Finally, care labor as a component of social reproduction can be both conceptualized and empirically situated as a collective action of solidarity. In some cases, care labor is not just performed or conducted as work, but takes on a purpose of political practice in the face of social and economic inequalities. Montes and Pombo (2019) highlight this approach through their work with the group *Las Patronas* in southern Mexico. This collective gives aid to immigrants in the form of food, shelter and other support services as they journey north from different parts of Central America. Their emotional labor become collective action through mobilization of labor, funding, challenges to corrupt officials and other means of solidarity for humanitarian action (Montes and Pombo, 2019). In sum, the theoretical framework and praxis of social reproduction involves precarious labor, including emotional and care labor. These processes take many forms, but are an essential part of understanding the transformation and mobilizing dimensions of work in times of crisis.

4. Crises of capitalism during the COVID-19 pandemic

Decades of neoliberal capitalist restructuring have led to significant shifts in labor conditions. Following the postwar period of Fordism, with full-employment and massive capital expansion, the second half of the 20th century and the early 21st century have been marked by erosion of the welfare state, declining labor unionization and a rise in capital mobility (Harvey, 2003; Strauss, 2020). Recent capitalist crises include shifts in finance, production and labor stemming from the 2008 Great Recession and the recent COVID-19 pandemic. Feminist economic geography offers critical analyses of the driving forces, impacts and outcomes of these and other crises (Werner et al., 2017; McDowell, 2015). In many cases, scholars agree that capitalist crises are closely linked to existing gendered, class and racialized inequities in society. Indeed, the crisis stemming from this pandemic has exacerbated the inequities and disparities in the labor force and work in general. As noted by Rose-Redwood et al. (2020: 98), we are "witnessing a political, economic, and social crisis the likes of which the world has not seen since the 1918 influenza pandemic and the Great Depression."

From a feminist geographic perspective, the driving forces of capitalist crises highlighted above are especially relevant to themes surrounding social reproduction, precarity, embodied labor and globalization. Comprehensive approaches to these issues include diverse perspectives from the global North

and South, as well as country-level analyses evident in work by Al-Ali (2020), Cabasés and Úbeda (2022), and the special issue of *Dialogues in Human Geography* (2020). For example, the consequences of remote work (Cockayne, 2021), household dynamics during lockdowns (Andrew et al., 2020), the precarious nature of pandemic work (Loustaunau et al., 2021) and shifting education from the classroom to home (Manzo and Minello, 2020) are only a few of the societal upheavals experienced since early 2020.

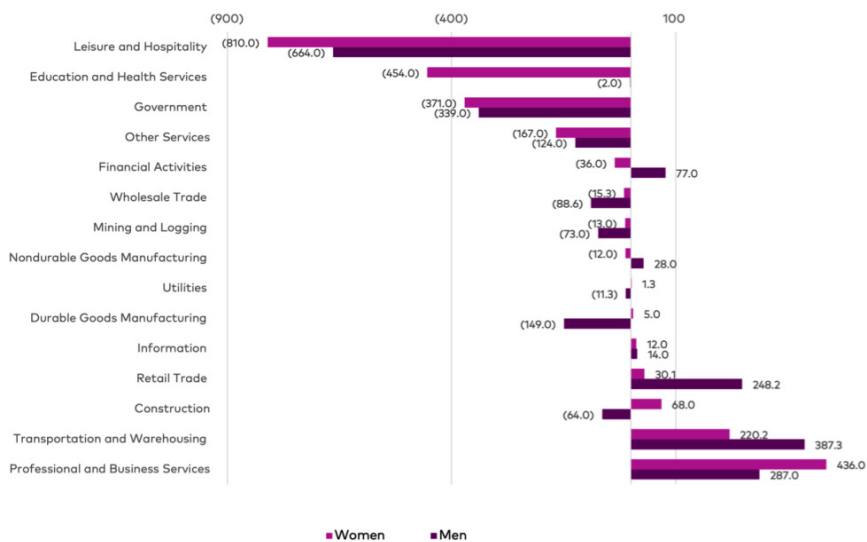
Social reproduction is at the core of many of these dynamics and coping strategies. Some scholars refer to “the pandemic-induced ‘crisis of social reproduction’ [...] where pre-existing inequalities are linked to specific risks and vulnerabilities” (Al-Ali, 2020: 333). Many women are responsible for child care as they work from home. These situations have lasting consequences, as support systems often disappear when they return to work. This section addresses how intersectional inequities across gender, class, racial, age and other power relations are exacerbated by shut-downs and harsh working conditions that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis is organized into four themes: economic activities, mobility, household dynamics and generational aspects of these crises.

4.1. Inequality and transformed economic activities

As outlined above, the public health crisis that developed due to the COVID-19 pandemic severely impacted conditions and operations of work and social reproduction. Lockdowns transformed how many people engaged in economic activities, with the shift to remote work and mostly virtual environments. Not all workers, however, had the resources or were allowed to work remotely. So-called “essential” workers, such as those in healthcare, education, and food services, continued to work in person under often risky and dangerous conditions (Loustaunau et al., 2021). Women and people of color are disproportionately represented in many of these fields, and thus bore the brunt of the risk and the overall negative health effects of the pandemic (Eaves and Al-Hindi, 2020; Platt and Warwick, 2020). These disparities appeared in the global North, as well as in many parts of the global South (Al-Ali, 2020; Bahn et al., 2020).

Already precarious work environments became worse during the COVID-19 crisis, especially in terms of job security, hours worked, conditions, pay and other dimensions of employment. Job loss and unemployment loomed large for many workers in insecure employment. Women represent a disproportionate share of service sector workers in areas such as retail, food services and hospitality, which were some of the industries hardest hit by the pandemic (Bahn et al., 2020). Figure 2 shows unequal job growth by gender and sector in the U.S. from the beginning of the pandemic in February 2020 to March 2022. During this period, women lost the most jobs in the leisure and hospitality, education and health services and government sectors during this period, but gained the most jobs in the transportation and warehousing and professional and business services sectors (IWPR, 2022). Among

Figure 2. Unequal Growth in U.S. Payroll Jobs by Gender and Sector (change in number of jobs on payrolls for women and men, February 2020-March 2022 (in thousands))



Source: IWPR (2022).

women, the loss of 810,000 jobs in leisure and 454,000 jobs in education and health services in the U.S. during the COVID-19 pandemic reflect the greatest loss in women-dominated sectors compared to the greatest gains by women in men-dominated sectors. Job loss and high unemployment among women in the sectors indicated below have long term negative impacts on income, job advancement and savings for retirement (IWPR, 2022).

In addition to women's significant job loss in many formal sectors during the pandemic, women lost economic opportunities in the informal sector, especially in many parts of the global South. These activities decreased considerably during lockdown, with severe impacts on women and their livelihoods. Finally, the return to work has been generally lower among women than men (IWPR, 2022; UN Women, 2020). These patterns are partly due to the fact that women often have greater responsibility for child and elder care in the domestic sphere (Loustananau et al., 2021). Studies indicate that the pandemic will thus lead to greater overall gender disparities in poverty and job loss (UN Women, 2020).

4.2. Mobility – and immobility – among migrant workers

Migration and labor mobility in general experienced significant disruptions with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Mobility of labor within and among countries was greatly reduced, with lockdowns in many workplaces, and migrant labor faced challenges in returning to their countries of origin. When

they did return home, they were often quarantined for weeks due to efforts to prevent the spread of the virus. This pattern was documented by Frye (2020), who examined the experiences of millions of Filipino migrants who worked abroad and had difficulties gaining permission to return, or were forced to quarantine on arrival in the Philippines. Studies also show that in both destination and host countries, migrants experienced higher rates of infection, as they were isolated or denied adequate healthcare or services (Platt and Warwick, 2020).

Throughout the pandemic, foreign-born and immigrant groups also faced significant discrimination and marginalization due to national exceptionalism throughout Europe and the U.S. (Ho and Maddrell, 2021). Rising xenophobia increased harassment and violence towards immigrants, especially people of Asian descent, as migrant communities were blamed for the spread of the virus. The conservative right often contributed to these fears with conspiracy theories and attacks on ethnic minorities (Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). Thus, labor mobility and immigration in general were significantly affected by the rise of fear and ‘othering’ they faced in their home and host countries.

Finally, the global scope of the COVID-19 pandemic extended beyond a public health crisis, and affected migrant workers who were involved in social reproduction. As noted above, the lockdown and closure of businesses were disproportionately felt by migrant labor, who were already some of the most vulnerable in the workforce (Ho and Maddrell, 2021). Feminist geographers Brickell and Yeoh (2014) draw attention to the concept of “householding” and the extension of social reproduction across state boundaries through complex webs of interdependence. These situations relate to broader analyses of precarity and social reproduction in feminist economic geography.

4.3. Household dynamics

Important aspects of social reproduction are the power relations and roles within households. Overlapping reproductive and productive labor often entail contested social relations and economic activities within the domestic realm. This is illustrated when, during the pandemic, people had to undertake both paid/productive and unpaid/reproductive labor as schools closed and children were at home, engaged in remote learning (Andrew et al., 2020). Numerous studies argue that the gender inequities in balancing work with domestic responsibilities during the pandemic will likely have long-term impacts on women’s reentry to the paid workforce (Bahn et al., 2020; Manzo and Mine-lló, 2020).

The spatial dimensions of these shifts are also evident in the use of informal spaces, as work and home life overlapped in kitchens, living rooms and bedrooms. These aspects of navigating COVID-19 required creative and often contested use of living space, which disrupted work patterns and schedules. Al-Ali (2020: 335) discusses how women feel overburdened and stressed with the added domestic responsibilities, in addition to missing support networks that they had formerly relied on through family and friends.

Finally, burdens and stress from the competing demands of work and social reproduction often create untenable environments and violence in the domestic sphere. Many women experienced higher rates of intimate partner violence, harassment and exploitation at home during the pandemic (Ho and Maddrell, 2021). In some cases, tensions and household conflicts rose as financial stresses increased and other circumstances such as job loss presented significant challenges. Domestic violence and disputes were also high among members of the LGBTQ+ community as a result of being confined at home with homophobic or transphobic family members (Al-Ali, 2020). Global incidents of gender-based violence and attacks on queer and trans individuals are important challenges to tackle within feminist circles. Thus, the household remains a key area and scale in analyzing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, social reproduction and intersectional power relations across diverse age groups and generations are highlighted below.

4.4. Generational impacts

Generational dimensions of the pandemic are also key to feminist geographic analyses of this crisis. In particular, youth and the elderly faced unique challenges during the pandemic due to lack of access to in-person education and healthcare respectively. Young children and youth were greatly affected by changes in the mode of education, and especially the sudden shift to remote learning in the first quarter of 2020. States and countries responded differently, but many children were engaged in virtual learning for one year or more. Family and other household members, especially mothers and grandmothers, were often responsible for supervising this learning (Manzo and Minello, 2020; Andrew et al., 2020). Initial studies indicate a significant setback to children in learning, emotional well-being and social skills due to this remote learning and confinement to their homes during the pandemic (Mervosh and Wu, 2022). Feminist analyses are key to understanding the profound social impact this situation presented to children, alongside the economic setbacks to many women.

Older adults have also been significantly affected by the lockdowns and public health crisis in unique ways. They experienced a higher risk of infection and isolation. In addition, nursing homes and retirement communities were subject to lockdowns to protect their residents from the virus. Caretakers were at the frontlines in these areas, and also faced significant challenges, as they cared for high-risk populations in these institutions (Springer, 2020). Additionally, the digital divide is a barrier for the older generation, who sometimes struggle to access virtual communication channels with health providers, friends and family. Finally, an important gender dimension of this generational difference is that women tend to live longer, thus are more affected by these social and economic barriers.

Overall, feminist economic geography offers important insights into multiple dimensions of crises and periods of economic and social stress. In parti-

cular, this approach provides the framework and tools to expand the research agenda and give critical perspectives on structural limits in both productive and reproductive spheres. These perspectives are also helpful in analyzing the complex and interrelated aspects of capitalism's crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, economic activities, labor mobility and migration, household dynamics and generational differences reveal important gendered components of this pandemic.

The next section explores initiatives and strategies to overcome these challenges and transform inequities under these circumstances.

5. Transformation and change: crises and the contemporary (and future) state of work

What lies ahead for labor and work in general, given the setbacks and challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic? How do the lessons learned from the pandemic inform our efforts to make the workplace and employment more equitable and inclusive? What measures can be taken to empower marginalized workers to secure substantive and fair compensation at work? As highlighted in this paper, several patterns and practices that are linked to the pandemic are likely to define the future of work. In particular, my discussion focuses on location, scheduling flexibility and technology. Feminist economic geography provides an effective framework to analyze these challenges and ensure they can be transformed to meet the needs of labor.

With regard to location and the future geography of work, scholars and practitioners see a continued shift to remote and digital work. The inequities and disparities in who and how this happens, however, remain problematic, with a disproportionate impact on low-wage and less-skilled workers, especially people of color, women and immigrant labor. As Reuschke and Felstead (2020) note, the ability to work from home or to work remotely is greater within sectors that employ financial, professional and technical service workers. These jobs are disproportionately held by men and those with higher education, pay levels and skills (Bahn et al., 2020). The benefits of flexible employment scheduling include spending less time on commuting and on the overall preparation and demands of leaving home for work. Furthermore, the ability to effectively juggle reproductive or domestic labor and work is an advantage for many. This flexibility, however, often puts additional burdens on many women, who, as discussed above, tend to have greater responsibility for domestic labor (Ho and Maddrell, 2021; Cabasés and Úbeda, 2022).

In addition, the rapid growth in online work platforms, the gig economy and remote work translate to increased demand for this type of labor and greater disparities in job security and income (Wood et al., 2019). According to Ertlinger (2017: 22), the employment landscape for crowdsourcing is growing, leaving workers who transcribe, process data and tag, for example, further disconnected from clients and business in general. The popularity of online and remote work is likely to continue following the pandemic, with

increasing demand for these services within often exploitative conditions for many workers.

As societies transition from the pandemic lockdown, the convenience and challenges of regulating remote work and the consequences for social reproduction at the household level have become an issue for companies and employees. A highly publicized situation arose with the company Tesla when Elon Musk required workers to be “back in the office” five days or 40 hours a week (Giang, 2022). The timing and scope of this created problems for families with care responsibilities and other constraints. In contrast, many service-based companies have shifted to remote work, indicating that a complete return to in-person work in offices is unlikely. Cockayne (2021: 500) examined the case of the Canada-based firm Shopify, whose CEO announced that “following the pandemic, employees would not return to the office and that the firm would henceforth be ‘digital by default’.” These examples illustrate the tensions among corporations – and workers – concerning the flexibility and convenience of remote work.

Finally, many economic geographers reject the celebratory approach to technology and digital work that has gained attention in recent decades. For example, Datta (2020) examines the digital surveillance of citizen movement that reveals intimate details of people’s health and demographic information in India, especially of marginalized and vulnerable people. In addition, increasing pressure, less protection, and exploitation in the workplace expanded with the shift to more remote and digital work processes. Datta (2020) claims that workers in Indian call centers and IT software companies are increasingly “stretched” to accommodate client demands. The key to digital and online work is to move beyond the inflexible and rigid conditions and highly monitored surveillance of workers (Wood et al., 2019). Furthermore, digital work should be technologically driven in a manner that reflects socially-embedded labor shifts (Reid-Musson et al., 2020).

Moving forward, feminist economic geography offers critical perspectives that challenge the uneven and disparate effects of changing patterns of work under the COVID-19 pandemic, and provide alternatives for more equitable and viable landscapes of work. The intersectional lens of this approach is key to analyzing processes that marginalize certain workers during periods of crisis (Eaves and Al-Hindi, 2020; Al-Ali, 2020; Ho and Maddrell, 2021). This discussion offers three areas of focus in advancing a socially-just and equitable trajectory for the future of work. First, attention to a care-led recovery has been the focus of much of the feminist geography literature, going back to Lawson’s (2007) early work on care geography, to more recent work on implementing an ethics of care in populations such as the elderly who were severely affected by COVID-19 lockdowns (Kim and Naylor, 2022). The effectiveness of a care-led recovery is demonstrated in De Henau and Himmelweit’s (2021) work on the economic benefits of this type of recovery with increased investment in quality care services and better conditions for these workers. The areas of social reproduction and production show considerable overlap in approaches such as these.

Second, the global implications of changing work conditions and patterns in the post-COVID-19 era are highly relevant to feminist economic geography. Studies have documented the impact of lockdowns and the disproportionate hardships faced by low-waged and migrant labor starting in early 2020. These processes are highly integrated, as demonstrated by the reverberating impacts of factory shutdowns, disrupted markets and labor immobility as the pandemic unfolded (Harvey, 2020). In many sectors, workers lost jobs as demands for certain products and markets rapidly shifted. For example, Brydges and Hanlon (2020) documented the heavy toll on garment workers in developing regions caused by shifting global production networks in the fashion industry. In some of these cases, transnational labor rights activists intervened to support precarious labor during these lockdowns (Al-Ali, 2020). Globalization also highlights the asymmetries in work protection, as retail workers in the global North are eligible for wage subsidies while workers in the global South were often abandoned by the state and by corporate actors. In response to these disparities, Brydges and Hanlon (2020: 197) state that “the voices of workers must be prioritized, in following a transnational analytic of care which supports workers through solidarities across borders.”

Finally, I argue that critical analyses of social reproduction and overlapping gender roles and spaces of work and home, as well as production and reproduction, are needed to advance a feminist transformation of work. These involve attention to domestic responsibilities and income generation through paid leave, expansive child and elder care and pay equity (IWPR, 2022; UN Women, 2020). For example, many developed countries have expanded gender equity policies such as maternity leave, mental health resources and increased support for child and elder care (Adeniyi-Ogunyankin and Peake, 2021).

6. Conclusion - reimagining work

As noted above, Arundhati Roy’s (2020) article on the global pandemic underscores the growing divides and crimes against humanity that appeared under the shadows of the COVID-19 pandemic. Focusing on essential workers and exposure to serious health risks, India suffered under corrupt leadership and the fissures of neoliberal capitalism. Yet Roy offers hope in the midst of this upheaval. “Historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next” (Roy, 2020).

The global health crisis caused by COVID-19 radically shifted the world of work and its connection to many other facets of society. The approach to and conditions of employment, workplaces and labor mobility changed dramatically alongside lockdowns and serious disruptions in the neoliberal capitalist economy (Harvey, 2020; Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). Among the gendered dimensions of these shifts were higher job loss among women, a slower return to the workforce, and disruptions in household and social reproduction (Bahn et al., 2020). I argue that the long-term consequences of these disruptions to

employment and the domestic sphere include a greater gender wage gap and, without significant intervention, diminished prospects for women in the labor market (IWPR, 2022).

This analysis sheds light on the multiple and complicated layers of the gendered and intersectional implications of this pandemic. The discussion is grounded in feminist economic geography's approaches to social reproduction or the essence of life's work, which includes both paid and unpaid labor in the reproduction of bodies, households and society as a whole, under neoliberal capitalism (Strauss and Meehan, 2015). As noted above, the pandemic affected all spheres of the economy, as many people shifted to working at home and those employed in what was deemed "essential work" often faced difficult health risks (Loustaunau et al., 2021; Al-Ali, 2020). These shifts accompanied a transformed approach to work, with increasing dependence on virtual interactions and practices (McLafferty et al., 2021). As a consequence, the workplace as a space of employment overlapped with households and social reproduction in distinct and often challenging circumstances (Andrew et al., 2020). I maintain that feminist economic geography provides the framework and tools to understand these dramatic yet enduring transformations to work approaches and practices under neoliberal capitalism during the pandemic. Disparities were exposed and inequalities grew as capital and health crises unfolded (Harvey, 2020; Rose-Redwood et al., 2020). In turn, levels of exploitation and deteriorating work conditions became and remain almost insurmountable for many.

In this paper, I outline four areas of analysis to better understand these shifts and subsequent areas of strategic mobilization. First, the shift to virtual and remote work was aided by digital platforms and work practices. As noted here, the ability to work remotely had differential impacts on people of color, women and low-income workers. According to Al-Ali (2020: 334), "COVID-19 is accentuating and heightening pre-existing inequalities, forms of exclusion, and poverty while also increasing risks and vulnerabilities linked to [...] various forms of preexisting marginalization." Second, mobility and immigrant labor are disproportionately impacted by changing work conditions in both home and host countries. Consequently, families who are dependent on remittances from these workers often suffered declining incomes and disruption in household economic strategies (Frye, 2020).

Household dynamics and labor are a third area that has been dramatically affected by shifting work experiences. Socio-spatial dimensions of the pandemic played out in households with uneven distribution of labor and a significant increase in gender-based violence (Ho and Maddrell, 2021). Finally, generational impacts are highlighted in this analysis, which shows how the elderly and youth were seriously affected by lockdowns and disruptions in healthcare, education and living arrangements (Andrew et al., 2020; Al-Ali, 2020). I argue that feminist approaches and practices are needed to provide a way to transform and reinvent our notions of work based on a care-led recovery. Increasing socio-economic disparities should be addressed through

strategic and comprehensive support for marginalized workers that includes quality and affordable child and elder care, appropriate technology and adequate compensation.

Moving forward, the pandemic gives feminist scholars, activists and policy-makers an opportunity to build on lessons learned from the disruption and inequalities exposed during this crisis and to mobilize for change. I support De Henau and Himmelweit's (2021) call for a care-led recovery as a way to focus on the care sector and care workers, the backbone of our social networks. The pandemic also provides an opportunity for global transnational organizing to support labor unions and workers dependent on mobility and migration. Finally, the focus on social reproduction as a foundation for challenging inequities and marginalization is key to transformative feminist strategies. These strategies include the household, embodied labor and social relations that are the center of labor and economic activities. Feminist economic geography is well positioned to lead these conversations.

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