Care and domestic work through crises. Juggling with space and time in Athens*

Dina Vaiou
National Technical University of Athens
divaiou@central.ntua.gr

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Abstract

The paper discusses changing conditions of care and domestic work in Greece in the context of the ongoing health crisis, which follows a long period of successive and simultaneous crises (financial, social, pandemic, refugee, war) and extreme neoliberal policies implemented to control them. The focus is on the burden that women (have to) assume in conjunctures which reinstate care (and domestic work) as "women's work", with particular emphasis in the periods of "lockdown" adopted by the government in order to control the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic. The general overview is supported by research in Athens and material from interviews with women who juggle with space and time as they struggle to care for the self and for others while adhering to personal goals and aspirations, as well as to the "social benefits" of previous decades of relative prosperity.

Keywords: care; crises and effects; pandemic; lockdown/s; geographical scale

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Resum. *Cures i treball domèstic durant les crisis. Malabarismes amb l'espai i el temps a Atenes*

L'article analitza les condicions canviants del treball de cura i domèstic a Grècia en el context de la crisi sanitària, que s'afegeix a un llarg període de crisis successives i simultànies (financera, social, pandèmica, de refugiats i de guerra) i de polítiques neoliberals extremes implementades per controlar-les. El focus se centra en la càrrega que les dones han d'assumir en una situació conjuntural que torna a situar la cura (i el treball domèstic) com a «feina de dones», especialment durant els períodes de «confinament» adoptats pel Govern per controlar la propagació de la pandèmia de COVID-19. La visió general es qualifica a partir de la investigació a Atenes i d'entrevistes a dones que fan malabarismes amb l'espai i el temps per tenir cura de si mateixes i dels altres, alhora que han de mantenir els seus objectius i aspiracions personals i els «drets adquirits» en dècades anteriors de relativa prosperitat.

Paraules clau: cura; crisis i efectes; pandèmia; confinament/s; escala geogràfica

Resumen. *Cuidados y trabajo doméstico durante las crisis. Malabarismos con el espacio y el tiempo en Atenas*

El artículo analiza las condiciones cambiantes del trabajo de cuidado y doméstico en Grecia en el contexto de la crisis sanitaria, que se añade a un largo período de crisis sucesivas y simultáneas (financiera, social, pandémica, de refugiados y de guerra) y de políticas neoliberales extremas implementadas para controlarlas. El foco se centra en la carga que las mujeres deben asumir en una situación coyuntural que vuelve a situar el cuidado (y el trabajo doméstico) como «trabajo de mujeres», especialmente durante los períodos de «confinamiento» adoptados por el Gobierno para controlar la propagación de la pandemia de COVID-19. La visión general se califica a partir de la investigación en Atenas y de entrevistas a mujeres que hacen malabarismos con el espacio y el tiempo para cuidar de sí mismas y de los demás, a la vez que deben mantener sus objetivos y aspiraciones personales y los «derechos adquiridos» en décadas anteriores de relativa prosperidad.

Palabras clave: cuidado; crisis y efectos; pandemia; confinamiento/s; escala geográfica

Résumé. *Soins et travail domestique en situation de crise. Jongler avec l'espace et le temps à Athènes*

L'article analyse les conditions changeantes du travail de soin et du travail domestique en Grèce dans le contexte de la crise sanitaire actuelle, qui s'ajoute à une longue période de crises successives et simultanées (financière, sociale, pandémique, de réfugiés et de guerre), ainsi que des politiques néolibérales extrêmes appliquées pour les contrôler. L'accent est mis sur la charge que les femmes (doivent) assumer dans une situation conjoncturelle qui situe de nouveau les soins (et le travail domestique) comme «travail de femme», plus spécialement pendant les périodes de «confinement» adoptées par le gouvernement afin de contrôler la propagation de la pandémie de Covid 19. L'aperçu général est basé sur des recherches faites à Athènes et sur les entretiens menés avec des femmes qui jonglent avec l'espace et le temps alors qu'elles essaient de prendre soin d'elles-mêmes et des autres tout en maintenant leurs objectifs et enjeux personnels ainsi que des «droits acquis» pendant les décennies de prospérité relative qui ont précédé.

Mots-clés : soins ; crises et effets ; pandémie ; confinement/s ; échelle géographique

Summary

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This paper was being researched and written at the time of the Russian invasion and the ensuing war in Ukraine, which has changed the balance of power both internationally and in Europe. The war has devastated the everyday lives of millions of people, many of whom have had to leave their homes and become refugees. This was also the time of the fourth and fifth rounds of anti-COVID-19 measures in Greece. A hardly mentioned effect of these "unexpected" crises has to do with yet another twist in questions of care, around which my paper revolves. In Greece, the effects of war in Ukraine are painfully added to more than ten years of austerity policies and almost three years of measures against the COVID-19 pandemic, which have plunged the economy into deep recession and revealed the shortcomings of neoliberal policies on care at various levels. This paper starts with a short note on care (which includes domestic work in this context); it then focuses on the changing needs and restructuring of care in times of lockdown in order to control the spread of COVID-19, based on research in Athens. Finally, some concluding points are drawn together.

1. A short note on care

Care has been on the feminist agenda since the 1970s, as an explanatory parameter of gender inequalities (see among many Gavron, 1966; Oakley, 1974; Gardiner, 1975; Chabaud and Fougeyrollas, 1978). A significant part of research at that time and for many years afterwards focuses on the monotony, isolation and alienating conditions of work for women who mainly engage in care, in homes and in their surrounding environments. At that time, recognition of care and domestic work as "real work" and as an indispensable component of social reproduction is central not only in academic research, including geography and urban studies, but also in a significant part of the Women's Movement, parallel to the claim for more egalitarian gender divisions of labour.[1] A great part of this voluminous research and literature in many countries and languages engages with the integration of women in paid work and the unfavourable terms of participation, which is closely related to the

1. See for example the campaigns for wages for housewives, or the vivid "domestic labour debate" in the Anglophone literature (For a summary, see Coulson et al., 1975). Also Christine Delphy's proposal for a "domestic mode of production", in order to underline the material basis of women's subordination, beyond the capital-labour relationship (Delphy, 1970).

ways in which the burden of care limits access to the labour market and to the kinds of jobs women can claim, affects the geographies of job searching, and delimits the space and time they have available to them in the course of a day but also over a lifetime (Vaiou and Stratigaki, 1989).

The topic fell into relative disrepute after the mid-1980s, as other issues became central in feminist theoretical engagements. It regained prominence "after 1989", through migration studies, when care became "real work", that is to say paid work, for the thousands of women who sought better life chances in the global North (Mattingly, 2001; Ehrenreich and Hochchild, 2003; Pratt and Rosner, 2006). New questions and approaches then occupied the centre ground in research and activism, including the conditions of extreme exploitation of migrant women in global care chains, as well as in regional and local contexts; the care deficit in places of origin and destination; remote care; and women's autonomous migrations. Although care remains significant for social reproduction, the ways in which it is performed change, in a complex web of economic, social and cultural relationships and technological developments,[2] thereby continuously re-determining the relative importance of family, community, the state and the market in particular socio-spatial contexts (Stratigaki, 2007; Huws, 2019).

The financial crisis after 2008 exposed the severe deficits of care in many places around the world, but it is the global health crisis since 2020 which has triggered a much broader debate at a variety of levels, from the body to the global, in a world that has remained "uncared for" over many years of neoliberal policies and attacks on public services (Chatzidakis et al., 2020). This debate has resurrected the ideas and propositions put forward by feminist scholars who, among other things, underlined the multiple components and aspects of care (material, emotional, geographical), as well as the need for a prospective "care economy" (Gibson Graham, 2006; Folbre, 2006; Tronto, 2013; Pettifor, 2019; de Henau and Himmelweit, 2021). In this broader debate, the key argument is that COVID-19 and other pandemics, the climate/environmental crisis of our time, the disgraceful treatment of refugees, and the rising violence against women, migrants, the LGBTQI+ community and people of colour are interconnected and all part of a disastrous lack of care (for the planet, for "our" communities, for "strangers", for women and other "others"). They have to be considered together if we are to envisage an alternative world centred around care instead of profits. However, many arguments are usurped by big business and international institutions, as new areas of profit are opened up by deregulation, the financialisation of care, and the promotion of individualistic ideologies of resilience, good life and self improvement as personal goals and skills.

2. Examples here include replacement of making by buying (e.g. clothes, food), assumption of part of care by the state (where and when it developed), change of various tasks by the introduction of electric and other devices (e.g. washing clothes, ordering food, buying on the internet), paid care for the better off, outsourcing of costs to consumers (e.g. putting together furniture, organising travel, internet banking) and much more.

The areas of argument and activism opened by this broadening of scope are very promising, both academically and politically. However, material aspects of care and the individuals who deliver it, either as unpaid or paid work, and who thus contribute to personal and community survival and well-being, are usually missing from the picture. It is "forgotten", even when mentioned, that women still perform two-thirds of paid and three-quarters of unpaid care work worldwide.

2. Care in Greece/Athens during the pandemic

In an interview published in March 2022, the chief of UNICEF's Greek Office, Luciano Calestini, said that, "Greece has a strong claim to being the worst country in the European Union to be a child" (Magra, 2022).[3] Reference to children is only a reminder of the continuing impoverishment of the country due to a series of crises since 2010. The government which came to power following elections in July 2019 is again implementing extreme neoliberal policies, thereby amplifying and deepening the already destructive effects of austerity which hit the country in the context of the global financial crisis and the provisions of the subsequent "memoranda of understanding" (the formal agreements signed between successive Greek governments and the country's creditors – the so-called troika of the EU, ECB and IMF). The last of these memoranda expired in August 2018, when a huge effort was made to restore some of the damage to the livelihoods of the Greek people, including residents of Athens, which is the main focus of this paper. (For a more analytical discussion, see Vaiou, 2020).

In the years of the memoranda, salary and pension cuts, skyrocketing unemployment particularly among women and youth (reaching 31% and 63% respectively in 2014) and shrinkage of public services and provisions resulted, among other things, in a general impoverishment of the population, and in different forms of homelessness (rough sleeping, sofa surfing, use of shelters, etc.) (FEANTSA, 2020). An unknown number of young people had to return to live with their parents, leaving aside hopes of a personal life; many households sought solutions of shared accommodation; and elderly pensioners went to live with their offspring, pooling their meagre incomes in order to survive.

War in the Ukraine and the sanctions against Russia have intensified an already serious energy crisis (following the destructive deregulation and privatisation of the sector), and contributed to a looming food and supplies crisis, including basic foodstuffs and fodder whose prices have almost doubled. Together with the shrinkage of salaries and pensions, these developments have led to a significant increase in the cost of living, and further impoverishment of the population, particularly among the poorer and most vulnerable households.

3. Greece spends little on children, particularly the most vulnerable ones (2,688 euros per child per year on education when the EU average spending is 7,000 euros); it provides low quality services in education, health and social protection; In addition, 31.5% of children under 17 live under the threat of poverty.

Material poverty is coupled with the multiple erosion of democratic institutions and the growth of parallel power structures promoted by a government which rules via favouritism and everyday corruption, absolute control of the media, and submission to the wills of big business and party affiliates. In this context, public services including health, education, and welfare services are led to collapse; a shameful refugee policy with deadly push-backs is in operation; racism and the far-right are on the rise; violence is becoming ubiquitous; and violence against women hits the news every day (Christopoulos, 2022).

In order to manage the pandemic crisis, the government has so far implemented a series of controversial policies which often aggravate health problems but also accumulate multiple problems for the economy, particularly in Athens and other big cities. In Greece, as in many other places around the world, the "medicine par excellence" used to control the spread of COVID-19 was to "stay in" (Savage, 2020). And indeed, during the first lockdown (February to May 2020), it produced positive results on that front. The quasi-total suspension of economic activity, however, plunged the country into even greater recession (Kapola et al., 2020), while few people questioned what "stay in" actually meant for the actual individuals who had to comply with it in the socio-spatial circumstances of the metropolis. It is to these questions that I will now turn, through the story of Susana.

3. …a snapshot from the times of lockdown

> "Stay home" is easy to say – but here I am, in a small flat, with Jason [my 14-year-old son] and my father [a 72-year-old retired plumber]. The school is closed. Jason has to follow classes online. He uses grandpa's mobile – but it is very difficult the days I am on morning shift […]. My father cannot go to the *kafeneio* [café] and spend time with his friends – he is grumpy and restless. At least he is at home with Jason when I am at work […]. The flat has one bedroom and the sitting room. I sleep on the sofa, in the sitting room – I make and unmake it every day. Grandpa and Jason sleep in the bedroom – and fight all the time. I can feel the tension already from the doorstep when I come home from work […]. And then I have to clean and tidy up a little, cook dinner, wash clothes and dishes – you know, the usual things. Foodstuffs I bring from work […]. We are privileged to have at least a home to "stay in" – and a couple of good neighbours who are there for us if anything goes wrong. (Susana, 38 years old, single mother, June 2021)

The quotation above is taken from one of a series of interviews and informal talks with Susana over the past many years which took place in June 2021, at a time when anti-Covid measures had been relaxed. Susana is 38 years old and came to Athens with her parents when she was eight, from Elbasan, in Albania. She finished primary and secondary education (*lykeio*) here and has worked in different jobs, mainly in retail commerce. She was married to a Greek fellow-employee for eight years and is now divorced. She lives with her son, who was fourteen in 2021, and, for the last four years, also with her father.

She currently works in a supermarket in central Athens (in the provisioning department). She is therefore one of the "key workers", as they were called during the pandemic, who had to *go* to work during the lockdowns (February to May 2020 and November 2020 to January 2021). She represents many aspects of the everydayness in Athens at that time, at least for the "privileged" urban residents who had a job and could still afford a place to "stay in". Her "privilege", however, stops at the door of her flat.

The homes in which most people like Susana had to "stay in" during lockdowns are usually small flats with minimal open space and rudimentary infrastructure, in old apartment buildings in densely built neighbourhoods. Such homes, usually inhabited by people who struggle to make ends meet, have to accommodate remote working for some, remote learning for others, as well as entertainment, play, privacy and socializing for different ages and preferences, with anxieties or possible violent outbursts – everything that "stay in" implies (Vaiou, 2021; Chtouris and Zissi, 2020).

Susana's flat is 53 metres square, with one bedroom and a sitting room. When her father moved in, arrangements in their overcrowded conditions became very complicated, in material as well as in emotional terms. Her father shares the bedroom with his grandson, and the tensions arising from the reduction of private space for both are a feature of everyday life. Jason feels that grandpa invades his private space; grandpa, on the other hand, complains that he does not have "a corner to sit in in peace". Susana herself sleeps in the sitting room, where she has to make the sofa into a bed when the others go to sleep and unmake it in the morning. In these conditions, there is no privacy or personal life for her. Before the lockdown, all of them used to spend long hours outside the home: Susana, then as now, worked shifts at the supermarket and sometimes went out with friends; her father used to frequent the local café, visit friends' homes, and participate in excursions with a local club for the elderly; Jason went to school, played outdoors with friends, occasionally went to the cinema, and went on school trips and visits to museums. Now, they are together in the flat "24/7", with few outings, and still looking for patterns of coexistence in a restricted space for expanded periods of time.

Sharing a small space and having to accommodate different and sometimes conflicting needs and routines has complicated their everyday arrangements and increased the burden and the necessary time for care – for the house, for the self, for others. The relevant literature focuses mostly on childcare and on the difficulties of remote learning in homes with poor or no internet connection and a lack of adequate hardware.[4] However, in Greece, like in many ageing societies in the European South, elderly care is an equally critical parameter in the reshuffling of everyday life during the pandemic – a parameter which has

4. The infrastructures provided by the government, through overpriced contracts with a big private company, have not covered country-wide needs. Private schools fared better and teaching and attendance continued more or less regularly, underlining once more the unequal social effects of the lockdown.

become even more complicated following several pension cuts since 2010, thanks to which independent living is practically unaffordable for many elderly people, particularly in big cities. So, they too "return" or move in with their offspring.

The story of Susana is illustrative here. To start with, caring for her father introduces a parameter of risk: he suffers from chronic pulmonary disease (COPD) and is more vulnerable to COVID-19, while she goes to work, mingles with unknown people, and may contract the virus and bring it home, where the possibilities of self-isolation are almost nil. An additional source of her anxiety is her daily use of crowded buses, for which no measures have been taken by the government (Vatavali et al., 2020). A third person at home "24/7" leads to tensions, further reduction of personal space, and definitely more domestic chores. With three people sharing 53 square metres, the place needs tidying up more often, particularly when every corner is used for more than one purpose. There are more clothes to launder and iron, and more cooking and preparation of snacks to meet different preferences. In addition, "staying in" all the time also contributes to increased bills for electricity, heating, water and the telephone, and in turn generates constant anxiety, even when the small pension of her father is added to her salary.

Tired and overburdened as Susana may be when she returns from work, she has to care for her father's sulky mood, which is exacerbated by the lack of privacy and the lack of socializing out of the home. On the other hand, she appreciates that Jason is not at home alone while she is at work. Jason has also lost his reassuring routines: he misses school and athletic activities, as well as coming together and physical contact with his friends. Although he is very skilful with technology, it is not enough for him to talk with his friends on viber or Whats App; and he certainly cannot cope with remote learning on grandpa's mobile. When Susana is around, she can discipline him and see that he participates in virtual classes, otherwise it is not a given that he will follow them regularly. She tries to save money to buy a PC or tablet and make things easier for him, but more urgent needs keep cropping up.

In these conditions, Susana feels she has no life of her own any more. She continues with her tiring job and the long hours of work for reasons of day-to-day survival. She is constantly doing housework at home, where time together necessarily expands for all three of them. Beside hard physical work around the house, she also has to care for the immaterial/psychological needs of the two males, and to ease the conflicts between them.

4. Juggling with space and time

The pandemic acts as an accelerator of a multi-faceted, pre-existing crisis and operates at different and intersecting spatial levels, from physical bodies to global developments, while exposure to risk and health care are socially and geographically quite unequal (Kapola et al., 2020). Moreover, the health crisis has been used as an "opportunity" to legitimise (or obfuscate) authoritarian policies and normalize violent behaviours on all fronts.

To sum up, I raise various points on three levels which relate closely to, and contribute to redefining, care in COVID-19-ridden Athens:

On a national level, legal and institutional changes subvert or practically undo decades of advances in many areas of social and political life, absorb piles of public money, "normalise" corruption and favouritism, and jeopardise parliamentary democracy as this pandemic intersects with pre-existing and enduring "pandemics" such as neoliberalism and austerity (Šušová-Salminen and Švihlíková, 2020).

At city level, a striking and most visible effect of the measures promoted to control the pandemic is the "emptying" of public space from its material and social content (Leontidou, 2020). This has resulted in an urban landscape deprived of familiar sights, sounds and smells, as well as of random encounters, socializing and sometimes also organising: closed shops, offices, manufacturing workshops and other businesses at ground level and in upper floors of multi-storey buildings, people sleeping rough, streets empty of the usual traffic, packed public transport, surveillance and police control and violence have become the order of the day. Less visible aspects of "emptying" include income cuts, unemployment, a dramatic increase in short-term and precarious jobs, a systematic grabbing of land and assets, and the dismantling of public services. This directly affects the bulk of care work to be performed in the private space of each household, and the incidence of violence against women, migrants and other "others".

The level corresponding to home and personal life rarely figures in public discourse, academic or otherwise,[5] while (suffering) bodies are visible only as numbers in COVID-19 statistics. The bulk of material and emotional work that keeps everyday life going, and the physical individuals – the women – who (have to) undertake it are missing from common understandings of the pandemic and how to cope with it. At this level, activities which used to take place in other spaces and in different times now collide in space and time, and turn everyday and longer-term care into an intricate puzzle, particularly in conditions of limited disposable incomes and the collapse of support mechanisms (public care services, family subsidies, etc.). Juggling paid work and care becomes an ever more complicated task (Karamessini, 2021), which requires difficult yet invisible planning and coordination in order to meet conflicting needs and accommodate the routines of different ages/generations, genders and personalities. Across all levels, the needs, aspirations, choices and rights of women are crushed under the bulk of work they have to perform every day, and are jeopardized by the uncertainties of an undefined but definitely more unfavourable and poorer "aftermath" (of the pandemic).

5. A prominent exception here has to do with domestic violence and femicide cases, which have made front-page news since 2021 (Vaiou, Petraki and Stratigaki, 2021). The victims are mainly women, but also children and other vulnerable people who have minimal escape routes.

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