

Reimagining value: A feminist commentary in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic

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“Can value be assigned to productive work which is not paid labor?” Joan Acker, 1973, *Women and Social Stratification: A Case of Intellectual Sexism*

Value: The Merriam-Webster dictionary defines value as, “the monetary worth of something; a fair return or equivalent in goods, services, or money for something exchanged; relative worth, utility, or importance; something (such as a principle or quality) intrinsically valuable or desirable; a numerical quantity that is assigned or is determined by calculation or measurement.” Evidenced in this definition, the notion of worth, money, and utility is all hallmark considerations of how we calculate, assign, and attribute “value”. Looking at the history of this concept and term, we find its modern articulation in neo-classical economic theory, and its singularly focus on exchange relationships, rational economic “man”, and economic productivity. With concepts and language derived from these economic notions, “value as worth” has become central to our understanding of economies, societies, and even individuals. Amid the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic, the ways in which we allocate value to our individual and collective human activities, and how we have come to equate value with worth and calculate utility has become fundamental in thinking through women's labor and their role in the economic recovery of nations.

For decades, feminist economists have challenged the ways in which traditional economic theories and assumptions forego any consideration of social provisioning, child and elder care, birth and other forms of feminized and gendered activities vital to the very ways we understand worth, utility, and productivity as they relate to the formation, organization, replication, and maintenance of our economies (Ferber & Nelson, 2009; Phillips & Taylor, 1980; Waring & Steinem, 1988; Woolley, 1993). Separately, but in a related fashion, feminist sociological analysis has demonstrated that the ways we theorize organizations and enact organizational life are gendered (Acker, 1990, 2006), demonstrating how the allocation of value to particular organizational processes and outcomes are gendered practices that favor men and the masculine. Joan Acker's prescient observation in 1973, as shared in the starting quote to this article, is a question around the way dominant perspectives arriving from mainstream economics and sociology still do not account for gender as an organizing principle of the economy and society—gender is relegated as an additional and different domain, beyond the interest of the largely male academic population.

The pandemic has not only exposed the limitations of our traditional theories of the economy and society but also highlighted the various ways gendered labor in the form of domestic work, childbirth/care, and eldercare are the very foundations of economies and societies globally. The organization of these forms of labor has suffered an exogenous shock, to use economic nomenclature, laying bare the very ways in which work is dependent on gendered labor that is generally unremunerated and/or low-paid and low-status. These gendered activities around social provisioning, work, and labor literally create and anchor the economies and societies that we deem essential to our humanity. Yet in many ways, the understanding of gender as central to any notion of value, productivity and time remains squarely limited to the domain of feminist perspectives. This is the case even in scholarship that espouses critical philosophical traditions as their primary lens for understanding the social, economic, and political—and in fact, some of this scholarship engages in critical sexism in subsuming theorizing arriving from feminist traditions as outside of “mainstream” critical philosophies while centering on a disembodied approach.

Meanwhile, feminist political theorists and activists have argued convincingly that the existence of women's reproductive work has been ignored. Silvia Federici's critique of capitalism illustrates that critical assessments of contemporary political economy have been overwhelmingly blind to “the significance of women's unpaid reproductive work in the process of capitalism” (Federici, 2013, np.). To recognize women's contribution to the economy historically, Federici shows how the function of the wage in capitalism created divisions between the working class and between men and women. In the 1970s, women's rights activists recognized women's unpaid labor as a source of exploitation. For the Wages for Housework movement (see, Federici, 1975), housework was a specific branch of capitalist production, that continued to render the sexual division of labor invisible. The revolt of women against housework in the 1960s exposed that the “value of labor is proven and created by its refusal” (Federici, 2013). The movement initiated by Leopoldina Fortunati, Selma James, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, and Silvia Federici refuted the model of reproduction, and from the mid-1970s, women's private struggles were made visible, at least to those who were willing to pay attention. Of note, in the United States, the Welfare Mothers Movement worked to recognize the economic value of women's reproductive work and declared welfare a women's right.

Historical divisions on the grounds of sex, class, and race remain and have been illuminated during the pandemic. Today, we see the continued omission of women's unpaid reproductive work and women's roles in the post-Covid-19 economic recovery. In Australia, the conservative government's 2020 budget faced significant criticism for prioritizing male-dominated industry investment and failing to plan for women's return to work through paid childcare. In effect, the policy is based on the premise that recovery will be achieved by making sure men have jobs. This exemplifies how governments and capitalist institutions continue to ignore that the production of life is almost exclusively done by women, and that this is a taken for granted dimension of economic activity. As Federici surmises, “women continue to reproduce their families regardless of the value the marketplace places on their lives, valorizing their existence, reproducing them for their own sake, even when the capitalists declare their uselessness as labor-power” (2013: np.).

While the 20th century saw women's participation in the paid labor force increasingly significantly in many nations, the Covid-19 pandemic witnessed a significant shift which pushed women back into the home as they lost their jobs. Capitalist organization of work and the relations of production during the pandemic have heightened the precarity of the paid employment of many women. As the world adapts to “COVID normal” workforce restructuring has become commonplace as a response, and the ways in which it affects women and the effects on the family require close monitoring. Moreover, the pandemic once again exposed the lack of attention that has been given to women's invisible and unpaid labor and the inequalities between women and men's labor-power. In public discourse, almost no attention has been given to women's paid and unpaid labor perhaps because governments and institutions continue to be willfully blind to gender, or because they consider that it is in their best interest to continue to exploit women. And even in instances where women's withdrawal from paid/productive work in the economy to tend to the domestic sphere is acknowledged, little is being done to reorganize extant structures that have contributed to the ongoing inequalities in the formal and informal domains of work. Action is required to assert the gendered character of productive work and its contribution and value to the state and to society more

generally. Redressing the “umbilical connection between the devaluation of reproductive work and the devaluation of women's social position” (Federici, 2013) is critical. There are five factors that we believe are worth drawing special attention to.

First, the ways in which colonial capitalism manifests in economies requires close analysis to recognize systems of disadvantage that affect women's labor differently. Acknowledging the exploitation of women historically enables analysts to cost and recover the economic value of women's labor. Decolonial feminism exposes the impact of the crisis on individuals, health systems, and economies in the Global South highlight preexisting inequalities. As Al-Ali (2020) discusses that specific risks and vulnerabilities are associated with intersectional preexisting inequalities in the Global South especially the wider challenges faced by LGBTQ populations, ethnic minorities, domestic workers, migrants, and sex workers. Considering transnational feminist solidarities, Al-Ali highlights how against the background of gendered intersectional challenges, feminist initiatives, and mobilizations to deal with the crisis in specific local contexts as well as nationally, regionally, and transnationally are required. Al-Ali alerts us to the need to attend to the pandemic-induced “crisis of social reproduction.” Specifically, this draws attention to the effects on women as the main caregivers as well as addressing various forms of gender-based violence, mounting poverty and limited access to resources and health services, which have become particularly devastating in marginalized and vulnerable communities in the Global South.

Second, recognizing the structural inequalities exacerbated by COVID-19 is vital. As an example, a report by the office for National Statistics in the United Kingdom reported how mortality rates from COVID was disproportionately high in economically deprived areas (Forrest, 2020). Furthermore, the Institute for Fiscal Studies found that Black, Asian and minority ethnic people were dying from COVID at more than three times the rate of the white population. Other studies have shown how the long-term effects of the pandemic will be a widening of global political and economic inequalities (Rogers, 2020). Despite dominant gender-neutral or gender-blind accounts of the pandemic, gender and feminist research accounts for the mounting inequalities experienced by intersectionally diverse women. Poverty, lack of health provisions, escalating domestic violence including financial violence compound the grim realities facing women.

Third, women are disproportionately affected by COVID-19, revealing the critical importance of making the effects of the pandemic on women visible. When it comes to the world of work, women are most effected by the pandemic, bearing the brunt of the economic fallout by falling out of the workforce (Vesoulis, 2020). In New Zealand, 90% unemployed are women (Robinson, 2020). The effects of the pandemic has resulted in what some commentators refer to as the “shecession” and it is reported that for the first time in the US history that an economic downturn which leads to job and income losses affect women more than men (Holpuch, 2020).

The International Labor Organization estimated that the pandemic would have a catastrophic effect on loss of working hours and earnings (ILO, 2020). Many women especially, Black and Latina women, in the United States of America are disproportionately affected, occupying low-paid, low-skilled jobs, where a sudden loss of income has devastating effects. Women also hold jobs in female-dominated sectors such as care, education, retail, and hospitality which have been dramatically affected by lockdown. Duant (2020) drawing on findings from the McKinsey Global Institute suggests that women's jobs are 1.8 times more vulnerable than men's jobs. Furthermore, women are over-represented in casual employment making them ineligible for unemployment benefits in many countries. COVID-19 has led to economic recession around the world; in many countries, the worst recessions since the beginning of capitalism are predicted. Women working in the health sector also have increased pressures at work to address and safeguard against the virus as well as increased domestic work for those with children. What is evident is that the mental health impacts on women from financial and workload stress significantly exacerbates gender inequality. Lack of job security and flexibility, lower wages, and lack of childcare experienced before the pandemic have become worse and show how support systems require funding. To do so requires discussion of the economy and institutional life through an analysis of value and the recognition of care work.

Fourth, women are bearing the brunt of “home-work,” including care work such as childcare and eldercare. Duant (2020) discusses a University of Melbourne study whose provisional results suggest that for households with

children, social isolation, and school closures have added an extra 6 h a day for care and supervision. Of those 6 h, for heterosexual nuclear families, around 4 h are being done by women, and 2 by their male partners. Housework, meanwhile, is up around an hour and 10 min every day for women, but less than half an hour for men. COVID-19 has exposed home as central to production. Key to discussions on feminist economy, feminist critiques of capital and sociology of women's work are recognizing the contradictions of "home" (for those who have one and we recognize rising homelessness during the pandemic in the countries in which we live and work). On the one hand, home can be a space of safety but on the other a vulnerable space for those with excess caring. Moreover, gender-based violence has surged globally since lockdowns started. In Australia, domestic and family violence rates have risen across all socioeconomic groupings, and in all contexts (The Australian Institute of Criminology, 2020). In Bogota Columbia, as another example, Skinner (2020) reports an increase of violence toward women increased 225% in the first week of lockdown.

Fifth, as Mezzadri (2020) ascertains, "before turning into a crisis of production, the current pandemic has created a systemic crisis of social reproduction" (np.). Recognizing women's production of living individuals requires costing and involves assigning worth for what Mies refers to the "making the life of the people." This demonstrates the necessity of rejecting the idea that labor productivity as being purely related to the realm of paid employment that produces surplus value. Ultimately, it is the human life itself that is productive, with value arising from the very reproduction of that life. As Mies argues:

labour can only be productive in the sense of producing surplus value as long as it can tap, extract, exploit, and appropriate that labor which is spent in the production of life, or in subsistence production which is non-wage labor mainly done by women. As this production of life is the perennial precondition of all other historical forms of productive labor, including that under conditions of capital accumulation, it has to be defined as work and not as unconscious "natural" activity. Human beings do not only live: they produce their life (1981: 6).

More recently, Titthi Bhattacharya (in Jaffe, 2020) has discussed how the pandemic has shown the centrality of "life making" for the working of capitalism. In Bhattacharya's words:

Life-making in the most direct sense is giving birth. But in order to maintain that life, we require a whole host of other activities, such as cleaning, feeding, cooking, and washing clothes. There are physical institutional requirements: a house to live in; public transport to go to various places; public recreational facilities, parks, after-school programs. Schools and hospitals are some of the basic institutions that are necessary for the maintenance of life and life-making (n.p.)

Bhattacharya also discusses how COVID has clarified two central problems. The first is that care and "life-making" work are essential forms of labor. As she puts it:

Right now when we are under lockdown, nobody is saying, "We need stockbrokers and investment bankers! Let's keep those services open!" They are saying, "Let's keep nurses working, cleaners working, garbage removal services open, food production ongoing." Food, fuel, shelter, and cleaning: these are the "essential services."

Bhattacharya's second point is that COVID has shown that capitalism is not capable of addressing the effects of a pandemic. This is so, she argues because capitalism's orientation is toward profit maximization rather than the maintenance of life. For the capitalist, the tragedy of COVID is a diminished economy, not the loss of human life. It is this economy, for the capitalist, that must be protected and defended at all costs—even if it means lives and livelihoods lost.

Increased care work, as well as the stark “care inequalities,” have been experienced by different communities and individuals across the globe as a result of COVID (Mezzadri, 2020). The pandemic has exposed the harsh realities of this reproductive crisis which discriminates across intersectional difference. For Federici (2013) attending to reproductive work is subversive. In practical terms, attending to reproductive work lies at the heart of feminism to ensure that economic resources are allocated and distributed to those women who need them most. Life work and its value is central to recognizing women's value.

The points we have discussed above demonstrate the regressive effects that COVID has had on women's work and lives. But it is also important to take this catastrophe as an opportunity to recognize women's contribution to the economy and the value of women's work to economic recovery. It is especially pertinent to reassert that for many women this also involves a recognition of their reproductive and unpaid work. Focusing on understanding women's lives and organizing differently after the crisis will be needed (see also, Daskalaki, Fotaki, and Sotiropoulou (2019) in relation to organizing after the global financial crisis [GFC]), as will an assessment of the unequal distribution of the value created by women's work, especially reproductive work.

Valuing women's labor for its true contribution would enable the creation of more democratic and equitable societies in which we live and raise future generations of citizens. Questioning the ways in which institutions currently reinforce patriarchy and the nonrecognition of women would enable broader questions regarding women's worth to be acknowledged. This focus on value and worth requires giving credit to women's labor beyond the formal work contract. Documenting the extent of the crisis, and the ways in which economies can recover relies on recognizing women's value. An equitable economy needs to move from seeing women's value not as an individual issue but as a structural, institutional issue. It is critical that we assert the human rights of women, including reproductive rights, as a fundamental social justice issue. AbiRafeh (2020) reminds us that feminist economies can be built in post-COVID times but recognizing the role patriarchy plays in holding women back is essential, and this requires the redefinition of “productivity.”

At *Gender, Work & Organization*, over the course of the pandemic, we have created a space for the recording and dissemination of global experiences, stories, and analyses of the ongoing gendered and intersectional consequences and impacts of COVID. For us, this is a central feminist intervention—a feminist ethico-praxis into the domain of value. Here value is understood beyond its function in an economic equation. Thinking of value differently can allow us to reimagine the norms of work, concepts of productivity, and possibilities of agency under neoliberalisms many global manifestations. Such a politics requires that we ask, “What does a feminist use of time look like?” as a provocation intended to surface how come we allocate financial value to certain activities. Also questioned is how the interplay of agency and structures lead to certain “choices” by certain bodies/people, and what alternatives there might be to purely economic imaginaries of productivity in our lives.

As the pandemic unfolds, we are witnessing disruptions to the social, economic, and political domains as previously established norms and organization of our lives and work have started to come undone. This undoing has shattered many vulnerable people's lives and livelihoods; lives that were precarious prior to the pandemic and now face an even more uncertain future if one at all. At the same time, we see an opportunity to create new ways of thinking about and doing “value”—how do we emerge from this crisis in a manner that recognizes the hitherto invisible ways “noneconomic” value was getting done behind closed doors, in homes, in care-centers, and in academia? How do we move beyond repeating past omissions and understand value in relation to gendered activities that enhance our functionings and capabilities (Sen, 1980, 2004)? Emerging from this is the opportunity to meaningfully reorganize work and expand our theoretical frameworks across all social science disciplines to account for gender. Inspired by those feminists before us, we call for “the reopening of a collective struggle over reproduction, reclaiming control over the material conditions of our reproduction and creating new forms of cooperation around this work outside of the logic of capital and the market” (Federici, 2013, np.).

The various contributions to the Feminist Frontiers section of this journal on COVID-19 have come from global, diverse experiences, bodies, affects and positions of vulnerabilities. They have rendered visible, real, and

emotionally near the pain, fear, sense of isolation, serenity, anxiety, and even joy that the collective “we” are feeling. These pieces speak about desperation, privilege, opportunity, and reflexivity. Scholars engage in conversations that may push our level of comfort and challenge our thinking as the author's words invite us to share in a private moment, a feeling, an observation. The seemingly simple yet powerful acts of reading can catapult us into a world and set of experiences we may otherwise never know. A feminist intervention into how we reimagine value through the sharing of texts about ones' experiences: an epistemological act of undoing how we know what we know about value and offering space to remake new knowledge about the constitution of value in our lives. Both the special issue (Özkazanç-Pan and Pullen, 2020) and the papers that contribute to forthcoming issues of the journal are a call to arms which remind us to keep asking the same intersectional questions over and over again (Enloe in conversation, Prasad & Zulfiqar, 2020), until our realities are different.

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