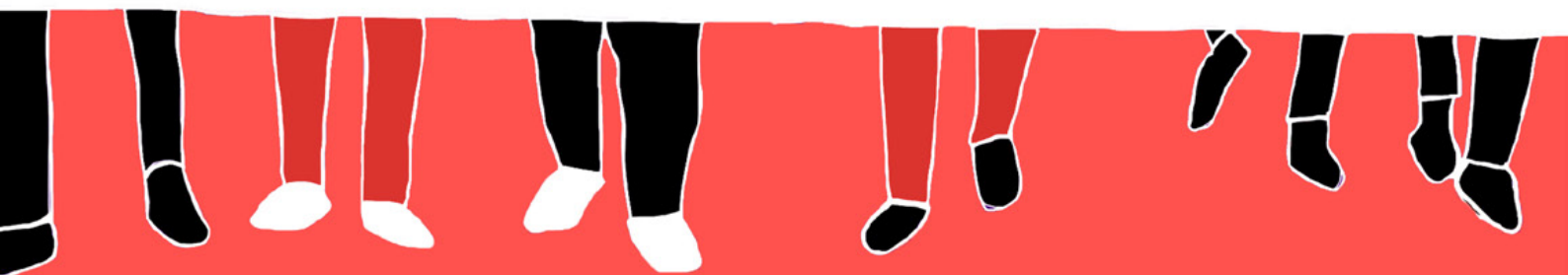




FEMINIST PERSPECTIVES ON CARE WORK IN THE MENA REGION



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Part 1.

Introduction and Overview

There is a dearth of credible studies and statistics on women's care work in the MENA region. However, feminist activists and scholars concur that the care economy is vital to the wellbeing and livelihoods of communities in the Arab region, especially where these communities encounter challenges in securing their livelihoods.

With this in mind, it is important to note that the burden of care work is perceived as the responsibility of women and girls. This is linked to gender roles, which frame women and girls as "natural carers" who have "inherent skills" that allow them to excel in carrying out these tasks. In fact, educational curricula across the region perpetuate the perception that women are primarily responsible for care work.

We will define "care work" as follows: the care of people, housework and other forms of voluntary work that serve the greater community.

Defined as such, care work performed by women and girls – and which is often non-negotiable – presents a serious time constraint as well as a hindrance to accessing opportunities for various forms of self-advancement. This work is unevenly distributed between men and women. According to the ILO, on average, women spend four times more hours performing care work than men. Even when women engage in work outside of the home, they usually still have the same care responsibilities in their household.

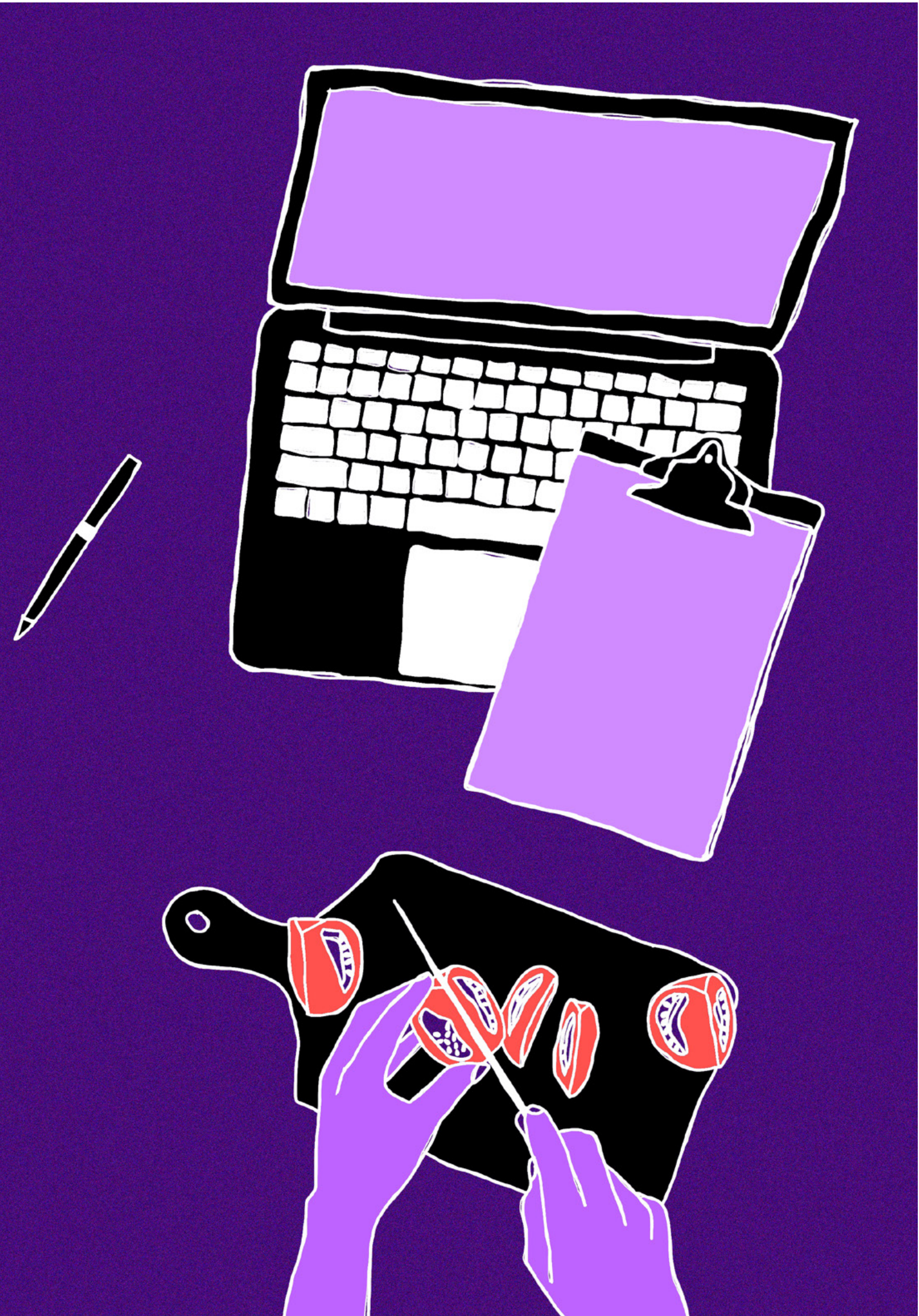
Thus, cost-benefit analyses often show that this obligation is the main reason women do not engage in paid work, especially in the absence of state-imposed policies and institutional arrangements that encourage women to do so. As such, it is no surprise that Arab states have the lowest rates of female labour force participation globally. Progress at this level has been minimal (29% in 1997 compared to 34% in 2017). When serious crises in the region (e.g. mass migration or violent conflict) result in changing gender roles, care work remains within the realm of women and girls.

"Care work – essentially the care of others, whether paid or unpaid – remains non-transferable, undervalued, poorly recognised and forever constituting a barrier to women's and girls' advancement"

That said, wealthier and even slightly better-off households are increasingly employing paid domestic workers, often migrants. Thus, the burden of care, when possible, is simply transferred to other women who, because of intersections in their identities, cannot be spared from undertaking a type of work that is grossly undervalued, poorly paid and deprived of any form of legal protection.

Care work that is passed on to less fortunate women is equally as invisible, for it occurs in the "private sphere", i.e. the household, and is further marginalised by its informal nature. The abysmal situation of paid care work in the MENA region is further exacerbated by what is known as the "Kafala system", a modern-day slavery mechanism that puts the employee, in this case poor and destitute migrant women, at the complete "legal" mercy of the employer. When one considers that there are around 2.5 million domestic workers in the Gulf countries and the fact that most of them are women, one realises the scale and scope of women bound by the Kafala system.

As such, care work – essentially the care of others, whether paid or unpaid – remains non-transferable, undervalued, poorly recognised and forever constituting a barrier to women's and girls' advancement. Indeed, from the perspective of what is called the care economy, this work is critical if not vital for ensuring the wellbeing of the household and the community as well as for the reproduction of human and social capital.



Part 2.

Striking Global and Regional Developments and Trends

Care work goes under different guises depending on the milieus in which it is discussed. In certain academic circles, it goes by "affective labour", in others as "kin work". While these terms sometimes denote a particular ideological, disciplinary or conceptual approach, the subjects they cover see considerable overlap. Care work consists, broadly, of activities involving the care and maintenance of both people and objects, often within the domestic sphere. Care work is seen as women's work, according to traditional and patriarchal divisions of labour which relegate women to the private sphere and men to the public one. Such views hold that women must take care of domestic affairs, such as child rearing, housework and cooking, without financial compensation. Men, on the other hand, work outside the home for a wage and are the financial providers of the household.

These analyses, made popular by feminist critics in the 1970s and 1980s, have since become more complex (Collier and Yanagisako, 1987). One key objection is that gender roles must be considered within the larger socioeconomic context, namely, capitalist modes of production. Marxist feminists and historians have presented detailed accounts of the ways in which capitalism necessitated such a division within the household throughout history. Their writings follow Marx's claims that workers under capitalist production are exploited, as they are not paid for the full value of their labour. Rather, they are only paid enough to survive until the next workday. Wages, as such, do not correspond to the amount of time spent working, but rather simply to the cost of subsistence. Thus, these writers stipulated that unpaid domestic labour was necessary for the subsistence of the worker (as well as the reproduction of new ones). Domestic labourers, or women, were thus forced both to raise their children and serve their exploited working husband once the latter returned home. In this way, women were separated from their means

of production, their own bodies, which became the property of their husbands.

The product of this domestic labour is also separated from the domestic labourers, as the husbands and, later, children, go off to join the capitalist labour force. Capitalists, on the other hand, enjoy the privilege of not having to bear the cost of this labour as well as an endless supply of labourers.

The exploitation and subordination of women are concealed through discourses which naturalise care work for women, portraying it as an inherent attribute of the gender and punishing those who diverge from it, as seen historically through European witch trials (Federici 1975; Mies 1986).

These writings remain critical to our understanding of the emergence of care work in its present form in many societies, as well as its links to patriarchal and capitalist histories and societies. However, some considerations can problematise these readings of care work, as well as their implications for seeking justice, equality, fair treatment and remuneration for this labour worldwide. Silvia Federici herself joined the International Wages for Housework Campaign, which claimed that housework must be recognised as a form of labour like any other and must thus be remunerated.

Activists in this campaign advocated for the state to assume responsibility for the remuneration of housework activities in order to avoid the inevitable exploitation of capitalist modes of production which rely on unpaid care work. More recent writings, however, have shown that economies, and capitalist production itself, can transform the division of labour within the household. Marxist feminists analysed economic systems that relied mostly on industrial labour, but as economies become more financialised and

shift towards the service sector, the role that care work plays within them changes as well.

Anthropologists, sociologists and other social scientists have noted that, as industrial production has shifted towards the factories of the global south, women have become its primary workforce. Scholars have noted the discourse of femininity, sensitivity and delicateness being used to justify industries' employment of women on the factory floor. It is within this context that the language of "nimble fingers" emerges (Ong 1987). Researchers have found that factories employ women primarily due to lower costs.

Women earn less than men worldwide in industrial jobs, which many scholars have attributed to their work being perceived as "complementary" to that of men (Collins 1990). The legacy of women as care workers thus persists even when they are employed with a wage. Yet to claim that working women are only affected by ideologies of care work in the workplace is misleading, as these labourers are still expected to fulfil their duties as care workers in the home. As such, it becomes imperative to examine the ways in which both demands exert often contradictory pressures on women, and the kinds of aspirations and hopes they engender (Pun 2005). Ethnographers, for example, have not only focused on the undue weight put on women who work in factories while still being subject to patriarchal expectations of child rearing and housekeeping, but also on how their desires, ambitions and perspectives on care work and wage work change when they are in this situation.

There remains the question of care work when it is in non-industrial economies. As nations move from relying on industry towards other sectors, the role of care work in community and economic life transforms as well.

Global economies have moved away from producing in large quantities and generating consumers towards a "just-in-time" capitalism, which uses communications and technologies to study and supply products instantaneously (Hardt 1999). Care work in such systems takes on a whole new significance, as the labour of tending to others and fulfilling their needs becomes a crucial driving force of supply-side economics. Thus, what is usually considered "women's labour" and relegated to the private sphere starts to take on public importance.

The immaterial labour that women do when establishing networks of support and care can end up being co-opted by firms and corporations in order to provide certain services to otherwise inaccessible domains and communities. These conclusions also arise from broadening our understanding of what care work, or women's work, actually entails. It reveals that confining it to the "private" or "domestic" sphere is reductive.

Social scientists have extended their view of what the often devalued work of women actually consists in beyond the dichotomies of private and public spheres. These activities include networking and socialising activities between women, exchanging favours, maintaining common spaces – such as a neighbourhood café – establishing connections and gossiping.

Yet while this work is never recognised as a form of labour and often derided by patriarchal ideologies as pointless and a waste of time, it has become the subject of considerable attention on behalf of multinational corporations and other organisations (Elyachar 2010; James 2015). Multiple enterprises single out women and this type of labour as an essential part of the infrastructure for them to provide their services. Scholars and analysts have drawn attention to this phenomenon with development agencies, particularly in the case of microfinance, which primarily targets women. Lenders are keen to lend money to women as they are considered more likely to put it towards goals that benefit the household and child rearing rather than towards wasteful ends, such as drugs or gambling.

Moreover, creditors find collateral in the social networks built by women, leveraging notions of shame and honour within their social groups in order to pressure women to repay their debts. Women's care work can be further extended to the use of financial services. Responsibilities and expectations of care work also mean that women use communal bonds in order to set up systems, such as savings clubs, in newly financialised economies.

These perspectives challenge conventional thinking not only about care work and the private sphere, but also about the relationship between care work and the larger economy, which extends beyond the reproduction of the factory worker. In Egypt, telecommunications companies have attempted to make these

networks the basis for their products as well, offering services that connect people based on the infrastructure forged by women through care work (Elyachar 2010).

Another global development concerning care work which must be addressed is that of remunerated domestic labour and its relation to migration patterns worldwide.

This aspect of care work, which is laden with inequality, injustice and exploitation, must be taken into account as it has been documented nearly everywhere that care work is performed. Political economists have argued that, as women in the global north increasingly enter the workforce, a "crisis of care" arises since the responsibility for care work is no longer fulfilled by the woman (Lutz 2010). As such, women from developing countries come to fill this vacuum, which causes other issues, as these women are often mothers who are expected to perform care work in their own household. The low cost of paid domestic workers allows more people in the global north to participate in the capitalist economy. However, ideologies and social discourses associated with care work cause problems for paid domestic workers beyond low wages. Since the women work in the private sphere, it is harder for them to organise and unionise, thus increasing their vulnerability towards their employer, as domestic workers cannot meet and socialise easily.

Moreover, the affective quality of care work – or the fact that it is often associated with emotional labour and feelings of affection and warmth for others – makes remuneration a difficult and often uncomfortable situation for all parties involved. This further decreases the bargaining power of domestic workers demanding their salaries. Employers may avoid or delay payment by arguing that the work should be rewarding enough in itself, as it is a labour of love that should not be stained by a desire for money. Alternatively, paid domestic workers' access to that "private sphere" may create tensions, as employers often feel uneasy about workers being involved in such intimate situations. As such, employers may treat domestic workers with mistrust and scepticism, and enforce disciplinary measures on them. This includes a range of controlling measures such as obligatory haircuts, loose-fitting clothing, strictly limited access to communications and entertainment such as mobile phones and television, and so

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on (Constable 1997). Care workers' interactions with children may also be deeply scrutinised and surveilled.

All that, coupled with the difficulty care workers face in accessing support networks and advocacy groups from within the private sphere, as well as legal impediments to that end, further exacerbates care workers' vulnerability to abuse and exploitation.

Finally, these problems are compounded by other forms of structural discrimination such as racism and classism. Scholars have called attention to the various ways in which paid domestic workers try to strengthen their sense of self, either by dragging their feet, working only for households they approve of or withholding affection towards the members of the family they work for. Such responses are worth investigating, as they not only expose the daily abuses care workers can face, but also acknowledge that care workers are not simply passive victims of their predicaments.



Part 3.

Main Challenges of the Region's Care Economy

For the purposes of this paper, we have identified the following challenges from both a feminist and social justice perspective:

- The Kafala system, which is common, codified and normalised in the MENA region. This system locks poor female migrant domestic care workers into an employment relationship characterised by subordination and full dependence, and which resembles slavery. The Kafala system is a typical illustration of the complex and multilayered web of discrimination, oppression and exploitation. Indeed, poor women from poor and often conflict-ridden countries that fail to provide protection for their nationals beyond their borders (e.g. Sri Lanka, Ethiopia, Bangladesh, Philippines) seek employment in wealthy and/or more stable countries (e.g. the Persian Gulf, the Levant) where they are poorly treated and, on top of that, embroiled in racist discourses and practices.
- Patriarchal ideologies. Here we refer to ideologies which devalue care work, women's behaviour in general and are entrenched in hierarchical religious family laws that define men as the head of the household with unfettered advantages and benefits, and also give them the power to control women's bodies and life choices.
- Inadequacy and poor enforcement of laws, including labour laws. Labour laws in the region fail to recognise the nature of care work. Thus, women involved in both paid and unpaid work have no legal recourse at a time when violations in the private sphere are poorly defined or not defined at all.
- Conflicting opinions within the feminist movement. Remuneration for care work is a controversial topic, as some feminists see it as a tool to exclude women from working in the public sphere.
- The current discourse of most women's rights organisations, which considers care work redistribution or care work provided by the state or private sector a way of increasing employee productivity. This is problematic because it gives into capitalist logic and these organisations believe it is the only approach that works.
- The invisibility of the private sphere. Care work is often under the radar of the state, which directly reflects the total invisibility of care work, whether paid or unpaid.
- A lack of feminist mobilisation. It has started in several countries in the region (Lebanon, Jordan, Egypt, etc.) but so far only with limited influence/capacities.

However, it was able to make the issue of care work visible in a relatively short period of time, especially in relation to female migrant domestic workers.

- A lack of first-hand accounts. The voices of women carers themselves has yet to be heard, especially in terms of how they feel about this labour.
- The stable demand for care work. Many "feminised" occupations are expected to face big job losses due to digitalisation and automation, however, care work is expected to stay in demand, as it requires high levels of emotional intelligence and human interactions.



Part 4.

Feminist perspectives on the future of care work: An impulse for discussion

Studying care work and advocating for its just and equal valuation is an important endeavour, especially given that, as a conventionally "women's domain", care work is often neglected due to male biases in research and data collection on labour worldwide. While recent initiatives have emerged that seek to focus on bringing care work to light and to mobilise for better labour conditions, there are still many elements that must be considered in order to formulate a committed feminist approach that focuses on the voices of those most affected by policies, ideologies and discourses surrounding care work. Feminist policy must espouse anti-colonial approaches and focus first on what women care workers themselves have to say: for example, how they view their own situation, what they aspire to and why, and how they seek to fulfil their hopes.

While international agencies have done commendable work with regards to women's labour, their vocabulary and ideas around issues of empowerment and freedom may not be the same as their beneficiaries'. Feminists must avoid a universal and ethnocentric language that claims to represent what women's desires are worldwide. At the same time, we need to be weary of culturalist explanations that do not represent the diversity within the region.

The Middle East has often been subject to such analyses that reduce women's expectations and injustices to "Arab-Islamic customs", social pressure and notions of honour. While practices related to religion and community are certainly important – especially when the women in question bring them up – feminists must still strive to take the political context into account. That includes both the local context – e.g. the state, institutions and informal ways of organising – as well as the global context,

e.g. capitalist economies and global dynamics, migration, etc. These frameworks affect gender ideologies and roles, and have a direct impact on the structure of the household.

Anthropologists and sociologists, moreover, have challenged us to rethink what care work is in various contexts, as well as what purpose it serves in the economy, from invisible unpaid subsistence labour to infrastructure co-opted by multinational corporations. As such, there is a serious need to assess the value of care work within the region as a tool for evidence-based advocacy. It is also crucial to incorporate an intersectional framework into any analysis of care work. As mentioned previously, economic dynamics must come into play in any care work arrangements.

And, rather than reduce these divisions of labour as mere expressions of "cultural beliefs", we must explore how class comes into play in these ideologies. At the same time, other social conditions and identities interact with gender and class when it comes to care work. While feminists have rightly identified that care work has been long ignored due to male biases towards a "feminised" field of labour, it is important to avoid simplifying this range of activities as "women's work", i.e. a topic specific to women's studies.

Race, ethnicity, sexuality and other markers of identity also come into play in this work. Queer people make up a substantial amount of care workers and they may face a number of issues due to their identity that are otherwise not experienced by cisgender heterosexual women. Moreover, queer socialisation may be a way of resisting and finding relief from the pressures of domestic work. Race is also a major issue, especially when one considers migrant paid

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domestic workers and the often racialised abuse they face at the hands of their employers as well as the state, a problem that is notoriously widespread in the Middle East under the Kafala system. An intersectional approach would thus allow activists to mobilise marginalised or erased groups, such as refugees, migrants or queer people, to fight for just care work.

I would like to end this paper by referring to the "care diamond", a concept introduced by Razavi (2007) in which she highlights four sources of care provisions, both paid/underpaid or unpaid: the family, the market, the state, and the non-government and non-state actors. The care diamond initiative proposes the redistribution of care among these four different actors, a matter that would require financial investment in the private service market or public investment by both the government and the community. This model is based on the recognition that the benefits derived from care work exceed the circle of the direct and indirect receivers of care. Thus, a public, private and/or community investment in care work is an investment in the quality and durability of the overall social infrastructure.

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