

# WOMEN AND MIGRATION(S) II



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# 22. Back Home

## Lessons from the Pandemic on Care, Gender and Justice

*Debora Spini*

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This chapter aims at offering some elements for a wider reflection on women and migration focusing on the transformations of “care” and care work caused by the spread of COVID-19, both in the public and in the private sphere. The containment measures adopted throughout the globe have brought a regression into domesticity that has primarily targeted women. This condition of forced domesticity has, in turn, made the well-known gender biases regulating the distribution of care work even more evident: a development that could not fail to affect migrant women. The pandemic not only confirmed that the distribution of care is a matter of social and political justice, but also revealed its global dimension. The chapter will briefly address the nexus between care work, gender, and migration, to highlight how the new contradictions brought to light by COVID-19 interrogate feminist reflections.<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Care in Feminist Moral and Political Theory

Care occupies a very special place in feminist political and moral thought, to the point that an ethics of care is often identified as ‘the’ feminist approach to moral philosophy. Although this identification is

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1 I am grateful to Elena Pulcini’s cherished memory for the help and support she gave me in writing this chapter just weeks before she was snatched away from us. I also wish to thank professor S. Marchetti, of Venice University, for her kind advice.

definitely reductive, it is undeniable that major trends within Western feminist thought have singled out care as the ground for developing an alternative to mainstream moral approaches, beginning with Kantian deontology. Carol Gilligan's seminal work *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women Development* (1982) is considered the turning point for the development of an ethics of care, meant as an ethical outlook which focuses more on relationships than on abstract principles, on needs rather than on rights.

The choice to assign a central place to care in ethical reflection has momentous consequences, as it requires the adoption of quite a different vocabulary and conceptual toolkit from those which are typical of the moral and political thought of mainstream, Western modernity. A care-centered approach to ethics goes beyond rationality and impartiality, as it calls into play the emotional ('passional') dimension.<sup>2</sup> More importantly, re-thinking moral capacity in terms of care makes it necessary to view the dominant model of moral agent as an independent subject, capable of rational self-government. A relationship of care is instead by its own nature asymmetrical, as it implies that at least one of the parties involved is needy, vulnerable and fragile. Such a drastic change of paradigm makes it necessary to reconsider many of the crucial assumptions underlying mainstream Western moral and political philosophy: to take but one example, the nexus between responsibility and vulnerability.

The focus on care has momentous consequences also in the field of politics, as in Western democracy moral autonomy and citizenship are deeply connected. In fact, in the experience of Western democracies, the capacities of independent and impartial moral judgment and rational self-government have been regarded as the pre-condition for accessing democratic citizenship. Integrating care within the scope of democratic politics, on the contrary, makes it necessary to think beyond the entitlement to 'individual rights' as the grounds for legitimacy and agency. In fact, citizens may not be already independent and autonomous agents claiming recognition, as they may find themselves in the condition of being vulnerable, fragile, needy. A genuinely democratic political community therefore has to "take care" of its citizens, so as to make it

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2 For an in-depth philosophical analysis of the implications of giving care, as well as for an exhaustive debate of the literature, see Pulcini 2012.

possible for them to actually exercise political autonomy: “rights” are thus reformulated as capabilities (Nussbaum 2000).

The focus on care has raised a host of debates even within feminist scholarship and activism. Critical voices have observed how it may end up reinforcing a patriarchal binary order, based upon an essentialist view whereby women would be ‘by nature’ oriented to nurture and care.<sup>3</sup> This critique points to a very important knot of issues lying at the heart of modern democratic politics, which may be traced back to the division between public and private spheres: a cornerstone of the Western liberal conception of citizenship which developed hand in hand with the affirmation of capitalism. In this view, the sphere of citizenship is regulated by individual rights, whilst competition dominates in that of economic life, whilst the family is supposed to be regulated by generosity, love, and selflessness, a series of virtues epitomized by maternal love. In this haven of virtue, justice had no place. Insofar as they belonged solely to the private sphere, women remained so to say ‘condemned’ to their natural destiny of caregivers.

On the other hand, care does not have to be necessarily the sworn enemy of justice. On the contrary, they can be considered as mutually dependent: the oblation nature of care is possible only within a justice framework, whilst the emotional dimension of care, with the value it attributes to the emotional dimension, may provide the motivation to fight injustice (Pulcini 2020).

## 2. Care Work, Gender and Migration

The family thus emerges as the sphere performing a series of care functions: care therefore is not solely a mental or emotional inclination, but a fully-fledged form of work. Tronto and Fisher defined caring as “a species activity that includes every-thing that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining Web” (Tronto 1993, 103). In this light, care becomes in fact a form of work, originally performed mostly, if not exclusively, by the family. In contemporary

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3 See for example Dietz 1998.

societies, especially those implementing some kind of welfare state, care related works are performed by a wide variety of professions, such as nurses, social workers, educators. The activity aiming to “maintain, continue and repair the world” includes the care of children of the elderly, of the sick and ensures all the minimal conditions for the reproduction of life, or, more specifically in the context of capitalist societies, for social reproduction. Care work is essential to capitalism, as it “forms capitalism’s human subjects, sustaining them as embodied natural beings, while also constituting them as social beings, forming their *habitus* and the cultural ethos in which they move” (Fraser 2016).

The lens of intersectionality reveals how the plight of domestic migrant workers is defined by a series of interlocking dimensions where gender justice interacts with class and economic structures, and consequently becomes part of a wider scenario of global justice issues. Women have (supposedly) gained access to the spheres of public life, however, the rhythm regulating the life of the family spheres has not changed. So ‘emancipation’ has in many cases meant that women have to juggle and combine the demands of paid work outside of the family and unpaid work within it. The care functions that make the world go around are still an iceberg, whose main portion is hidden from view. Care work does not appear in budgets and is not summed up in GDPs; time spent in care activities is considered to be ‘free’ or ‘personal’. To borrow the vocabulary of one of the most famous philosophical disputes of the last decades, care is thus both a problem of recognition as well as of distribution. Joan Tronto in fact points out how democracy should reflect on how to allocate caring responsibilities so as to take them out of the family (Tronto 2013). Tronto’s claim is even more forceful and relevant in light of the fact that, all over the world, neoliberal policies are jeopardizing welfare state services.

Failing a reconsideration of roles in the family, the access to external work has made it harder for women to comply with well settled expectations in terms of care work performance. Migrant labor becomes a crucial resource, as care work, within and outside the home’s boundaries, is more and more in demand. Needless to say, care work continues to have a marked gender character, thus leading to the phenomenon defined as the “feminization of migration”: “[...] women are on the move as never before in history. In 2015, women comprised 48

*percent of all international migrants worldwide. Second, there is a growing demand for migrant women's labor in destination countries, especially in the care, domestic, and manufacturing sectors"* (P. Lucio Maimon 2017). More specifically, domestic work is one of the most important reasons for migration. According to data provided by the International Labour Organization (ILO), the total figure of migrant domestic workers is approximately 11.5 million, of which about 73.4% (or around 8.5 million) are women (ILO 2015, p. xi). Domestic work is the less recognized form of care work: and, if care work is seldom recognized, migrant domestic work is almost invisible (Lokot and Batia 2020). Migrant domestic workers experience a specific form of vulnerability. They are often trapped in their workplace ('home') and the nature of their employment causes them to be isolated and consequently for the most part unable to organize.

The "globalization of social reproduction" (Kofman, quoted in Marchetti 2016, 452) causes millions of women from the Global South to migrate in order to perform "'women's work' of the north—work that affluent women in the Global North are no longer able or willing to do." (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2002, 3.) The term 'Global Care Chains'<sup>4</sup> describes the process whereby migrant laborers (again, mostly women) are brought in to perform functions of care, whilst other caregivers have to replace them in the country of origin. The real impact of this "care drain" on children, families and more generally on the countries of origin of migrant workers (Ochshield 2014, 121) is still to be fully appreciated.

### 3. Gender, Migration and Pandemic

The pandemic has further embittered the knot of contradictions surrounding the distribution of care. As far as the Western world is concerned, the measures to contrast COVID-19 have upset the fragile equilibrium between life and work, or public and private, by causing a

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4 Amaia Pérez Orozco provides this definition of global care chains: "Global care chains are networks of transnational dimensions that are formed for the purpose of maintaining daily life. These networks are comprised of households which transfer their caregiving tasks from one to another on the basis of power axes, such as gender, ethnicity, social class, and place of origin" (Pérez Orozco 2009).

process of forced domesticity. The impact of these long months of home-secluded life on gender roles is still to be fully mapped and assessed, but the comforting representation of life in lockdown where yoga, healthy food and family quality time can easily be reconciled with online work is far from accurate. Women, like everyone else, had to go back home, but 'home' also became a workplace and a classroom. Many functions performed by public agencies or at least available on the market—the most obvious of all being education—are now taking place within the family circle, and, because of the enduring imbalance in the distribution of roles, such functions end up being the sole responsibility of women. The unprecedented economic crisis also has a notable gender dimension, which has prompted economists to speak about a 'she-cession'. First of all, women are mostly employed in those sectors more dramatically affected by the pandemic. Furthermore, the unfair distribution of care responsibilities affects women's professional lives, causing stress, burnout, and a consequential decrease in productivity (Madgavkar et al. 2020).

In this framework, migrant women workers experience a specific form of vulnerability, as detailed in a recent International Organization for Migration (IOM) report (Foley and Piper 2020). In many countries the majority of workers in the health sector are migrants, and more precisely migrant women who are therefore more directly exposed to contagion. The same considerations apply for the high number of migrant women workers employed in other caring structures such as nursing homes. Furthermore, the pandemic has exacerbated the already precarious status of migrant domestic workers. The restrictions affecting international travel and mobility affect migrant workers in general, but as domestic work is often informal and irregular, migrant women find themselves in much greater danger of being deported or fined. Evidently, the she-cession will impact women in the Global North, resulting in the consequently higher job insecurity of their migrant women employees. The care work provided by domestic migrant workers is at risk of becoming superfluous—or alternatively, even further removed from the light of public attention, and even more confined within the walls of someone else's home.

## Concluding Remarks: Where Does It All Leave Us

The most evident legacy of one year of life in the time of COVID-19 is a series of urgent and unsettling questions for feminist reflection. The pandemic's impact on migrant women shows what is really at stake in the redistribution of care work. The challenge of 'balancing work and family' is only the tip of the iceberg, and questions about care and justice cannot be hastily dismissed as 'women covering up for other women'. The specific condition of women migrant workers, if considered from an intersectional angle, shows the essentially political dimension of care work. Furthermore, the impact of the pandemic on migrant women makes it all the more evident how distorting and misleading the juxtaposition between 'care' and 'justice' is, as already indicated by Pulcini. The distribution of care work is evidently a problem of gender justice, and at the same time, as shown by Tronto, it is also a question of citizenship rights and of the nature and scope of democratic public spaces. Most importantly, the plight of migrant domestic workers in the grip of the pandemic reveals the global dimension of the distribution of care work, and ultimately leads, as indicated by Fraser, to a wider analysis of social reproduction in capitalism.

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