

## Women's Labour in Movement. From Servant and Housewife to Racialised Domestic and Care Workers

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**ENG Abstract:** This paper examines migrant women's labour and the embodied and affective experiences of poor and racialised working women amid the current care crisis. In the first section, I reconstruct the feminist critiques of Marxist political economy alongside Decolonial and Postcolonial feminist perspectives on the Marxist universal capitalist (re)production model. This offers a different genealogy compared to the linear historical perspective found in certain Western social reproduction and care theories. Drawing on Postcolonial and Decolonial feminisms, I argue for a broader notion of caring labour that goes beyond the shortcomings and pitfalls of Anglo and Eurocentric theorisations. In the second part, I focus on the embodied and affective experiences of poor, black, brown and indigenous Mexican, Indian and Filipino women to identify concrete mechanisms and relations of exploitation, oppression and violence produced in the migration process that sustain global care chains. I claim that nothing less than the reconceptualisation of a Deco- and Postcolonial Marxist feminist political economy can address the problems arising from the current care crisis. In the final section, I highlight the inherent ambivalences of global care chains as both a process of neocolonial feminisation of migration and reproduction of neoliberal capitalism and as a shared context of struggle and resistance grounded in situated experiences. My aim is to show how women in the Global South's concrete experiences and conceptualisations of exploitation and domination have enriched Western feminist theory of women's struggles for autonomy and liberation.

**Keywords:** feminisation of migration, reproductive labour, global care chains, racialised working women.

### **ES El trabajo de las mujeres en movimiento. De la sirvienta y ama de casa a la trabajadora doméstica y de cuidados racializada**

**Resumen:** Este artículo examina el trabajo de las mujeres migrantes y las experiencias corporales y afectivas de las trabajadoras pobres y racializadas en medio de la actual crisis de los cuidados. En la primera sección, reconstruyo las críticas feministas a la economía política marxista, junto con las perspectivas feministas decoloniales y poscoloniales sobre el modelo marxista de (re)producción capitalista universal. Con ello se propone una genealogía diferente frente a la perspectiva histórica lineal que se encuentra en ciertas teorías occidentales de la reproducción social y el cuidado. Apoyándome en los feminismos poscoloniales y decoloniales, defiendo una noción más amplia del trabajo de cuidados que vaya más allá de las deficiencias y escollos de las teorizaciones anglosajonas y eurocéntricas. En la segunda parte, me centro en las experiencias corporales y afectivas de las mujeres pobres, negras, morenas e indígenas mexicanas, indias y filipinas para identificar mecanismos concretos y relaciones de explotación, opresión y violencia producidas en el proceso migratorio que sostienen las cadenas globales de cuidados. Afirmo que nada menos que la reconceptualización de una economía política feminista deco y poscolonial puede abordar los problemas derivados de la actual crisis de los cuidados. En la sección final, señalo las ambivalencias inherentes a las cadenas globales de cuidados como proceso de feminización neocolonial de la migración y reproducción del capitalismo neoliberal y simultáneamente, como contexto compartido de lucha y resistencia basado en experiencias situadas. Mi objetivo general es mostrar cómo las experiencias concretas de las mujeres del Sur global y sus conceptualizaciones de la explotación y la dominación han enriquecido la teoría feminista occidental de las luchas de las mujeres por la autonomía y la liberación.

**Palabras clave:** feminización de la migración, trabajo reproductivo, cadenas globales de cuidados, mujeres trabajadoras racializadas.

**Summary/Sumario:** Women's Global Exploitation and Domination: Gendered and Racialised Labour. The Neocolonial Feminisation of Migration and Working Women's Resistance. The Ambivalences of the Global Care Chains: Challenges and Prospects. References.

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The current care crisis challenges broad sectors of the population in caring for themselves, for others, or for being cared for. Meanwhile, the racialised and gendered capitalist labour regime continues depicting women as responsible for domestic and care labour worldwide. Globally, domestic and care work intersect with different inequalities. The increased migratory flows of racialised and feminised bodies at the local and international levels highlight the entanglement of complex processes of oppression and exploitation produced during the migration course in both the place of origin and destination. The transfer of domestic and care responsibilities across national borders means their transfer from one household to another. Global care chains emerge in the context of globalisation, the feminisation of migration and the transformation of the welfare state through neoliberal politics and economics. As (trans)women *move*, migration is feminised, and networks of transnational dimensions erupt to maintain daily life.

This paper examines migrant women's labour and the location of poor and racialised working women in the context of the contemporary care crisis. In the first part, I unpack the reconceptualisation of the housewives as unpaid and reproductive labourers and of servants as racialised domestic workers. This section includes an analysis of the concept of labour and working-class agency from a Marxist, Decolonial, and Postcolonial Feminist perspective. On the one hand, I briefly reconstruct the feminist critiques of the Marxist political economy and, on the other, the Decolonial and Postcolonial feminist criticisms of the Marxist universal model of the capitalist mode of (re)production and its conceptualisation of marginalised and excluded subjects. The analysis of key concepts and arguments lays the groundwork for understanding the debts and innovations of Marx's political economy, as operated by social reproduction and contemporary care theory. Drawing on Postcolonial and Decolonial feminisms, I argue for a broader conception of caring labour that moves beyond the shortcomings and pitfalls of Anglo- and Eurocentric theorisations.

In the second part, I focus on the embodied and affective experiences of poor, black, brown, and indigenous women to identify concrete mechanisms and relations of exploitation, oppression, and violence produced in the migration process to maintain global care chains. I examine how these relations of exploitation both obstruct the agency and political organisation of migrant workers and simultaneously enable practices and strategies for developing a critical consciousness and political organisation beyond union-based alliances, not without the permanent risk of co-optation by NGOs and international agencies. My analysis draws on case studies (documentary research) of Mexican, Indian, and Filipina migrant women. I propose a simultaneous theoretical and case analysis approach to illuminate the limits and potentialities of concepts and practices.

In the last section, I highlight the inherent ambivalences of global care chains as a process of both neocolonial feminisation of migration and reproduction of neoliberal capitalism and as a shared context of struggle and resistance grounded in embodied and affective experiences. On the one hand, the global care labour market is built on social hierarchies, political ideologies, cultural values, and mechanisms of economic exploitation, producing new modes of colonisation. On the other hand, the care networks and alliances that emerge in the course of the migration process advance transnational emancipatory and feminist solidarity projects. My aim is to show how Global South<sup>1</sup> women's concrete experiences and conceptualisations of exploitation and domination have enriched the dominant Western feminist theory of women's struggles for autonomy and liberation.

### **Women's Global Exploitation and Domination: Gendered and Racialised Labour**

Marxist feminist theory and women's struggles have gone a long way to reconceptualise the figure of housewives as unpaid and reproductive labourers and the figure of servants as racialised domestic workers. The shift in our understanding of domestic and care work has not only rendered meaningful the exploitation, oppression, and violence suffered by (trans)women; it has also substantiated new conceptual tools and theoretical frameworks to acknowledge domestic and care workers as political and historical agents. Despite these positive developments, the history of women and (trans)feminist movements, their alliances and disagreements with the workers' and union movements, as well as the questions connected to the relevance of gender relations for the critique of the political economy, remain contested and are an ongoing debate. The following section reviews classical Marxist-feminist theory in light of contemporary Decolonial and Postcolonial theories from the Global South.

The debate on reproductive labour in the Global North, especially in the Anglo-American and European contexts, focused initially on cis, white, and unpaid work of heterosexual women in the household. In the

<sup>1</sup> Although the North/South distinction is somewhat problematic, considering there are no homogenous blocks and the persistence of power relations and hierarchies within the regions, it retains a particular explanatory specificity concerning geopolitical processes relevant to our case study. It is also a helpful distinction to continue mapping the inheritance of colonialism and contemporary neocolonial power relations. Continuities in the experiences, histories, and survival strategies do not mean that differences in experience do not exist or are insignificant.

1970s, Western feminists<sup>2</sup> argued that Marx and Engels and the subsequent Marxist tradition devalued and essentialised reproductive labour as feminised labour in relation to factory work, which was naturalised as male, thereby leaving unchallenged the binary and gendered division of labour.<sup>3</sup> In search for a theory capable of explaining the sources of female oppression from a class and gender perspective, Marxist and Socialist feminists discovered a rich conceptual framework for understanding women's labour and its role in producing value in Marx's political and economic theory. One of the main contributions of feminist Marxism was to critically address some conceptual binaries within the Marxist framework. A highly relevant distinction made by Marx between the servants and the working classes shows that this differentiation rests on an abstract notion of labour power as a potential capacity to labour that does not realise its value until it becomes objectified into a commodity. Based on this definition, a worker's labour produces a commodity whose value generates profit when circulated within a market (exchange value); in contrast, a servant's labour creates a personal service for their employer that is consumed and, consequently, whose value entirely dissolves by that single exchange (use value). Servants' labour does not produce any surplus value even if their activities and services share characteristics similar to those of the industrial proletariat, i.e., free labour rather than slavery, paid employment instead of being paid in kind. However, for Marx, servants living and working in modern capitalist societies continue to embody pre-capitalist social relations (Schwartz, 2022). This depiction of servants as "unproductive" workers echoed similar arguments on the unproductiveness of reproductive labour. Whether servants' and women's labour produce surplus value or only use value and thus does not directly contribute to profit divides feminists still today (Arruzza, 2022, 2013; Gimenez, 2000).

Likewise, Marxist feminists have shown that Marx's analytical distinction between productive and unproductive labour is politically charged. Marx's omission of a general servant class or domestic servant labour is problematic, considering that servants were employed to do hard manual domestic labour in middle-class households and not luxury items of the wealthy bourgeoisie, as he claims (Marx, 1993, p. 465, 1990, p. 574, in Schwartz 2022). The result was the omission of a general (domestic) servant class as part of the working class, which, to some extent, rendered them parasites of the bourgeois class or even a counter-revolutionary force. Therefore, they were not regarded as agents of history (see Marx, 1990, pp. 1044-1045, in Schwartz, 2022). This exclusion has contributed to the invisibilisation not only of (trans)women and feminised bodies but also of the workforce of colonised and subaltern subjects. In this manner, household servitude and paid domestic labour were excluded from productive labour and the proletariat. The conflation between domestic servants and unwaged housewives within the private sphere in opposition to men's productive and waged labour outside the household resulted in the denial of women and colonised subject agency. In the context of industrialisation and the growth of the welfare state in Europe in the decades following the Second World War, the decline of domestic and servant labour relegated them to a pre-capitalist form of labour, deemed backward and meant to disappear. A central strategy of Marxist feminists critically addresses the reproduction of labour power to defy the clear-cut distinction between waged and unwaged labour, between spaces of the production of value and spaces for the reproduction of labour power, questioning the Marxist notion of labour and value (Bhattacharya, 2015).

For these feminists, analyses of capitalism that focus exclusively on value production and waged labour are one-sided. It is misleading to understand labour and labour power exclusively as "assets" for making a profit rather than as conditions for (re)producing life. For Marxist feminists, labour is a human activity that creates life and workers for capital. A central thesis of this debate argues that labour power is a socially and hierarchically organised, embodied capacity. This led to a growing number of scholars addressing gender hierarchies as providing the foundation of class relations. (Arruzza, 2022, 2013; Gimenez, 2000). These analyses have shown to what extent the production of value at the factory is substantiated by the production of labour power in the household. This first generation of Marxist feminists accurately showed that capitalism as a mode of production relies on the regulation and control of women to perform unwaged, poorly paid, and/or serviceable reproductive labour. Capitalism presupposes and perpetuates the subordination and domination of women.

The almost exclusive attention given to the binary gender hierarchy that connects the production of life and value in the specific direction of the reproduction of labour power in the household turned into a new, dualistic explanation that accounts only for heteronormative gender-class relations. This approach presupposes that the reproduction of labour-power and the worker's life under capitalism appears universally within the bourgeois heterosexual family and is performed predominantly by cis women. Recent generations of Marxist feminists, like Social Reproduction (SR), Black, Decolonial, and Postcolonial Feminisms, as well as Transgender Marxism, broadened this focus to address how the social reproduction of labour power provides the foundation of accumulation processes in relation to other ways of social oppression. This approach led to a more complex theory of capitalist social reproduction that enlightens the intersection of race, ethnicity, heterosexism, sexuality, ableism, colonialism, and religion, among other forms of oppression (Bhattacharya *et al.*, 2022; Gleeson and O'Rourke, 2021). By incorporating women's, queer, trans, indigenous, black, and people of colour perspectives and embodied experiences, feminists worldwide revolutionised Marxism from within and continue to do so.

<sup>2</sup> Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James, Leopoldina Fortunati, Silvia Federici, Frigga Haug, Maria Mies, Sheila Rowbotham, and Lise Vogel, among others.

<sup>3</sup> For a deeper reconstruction and analysis, see Haug (2011, 2005); Arruzza (2022, 2013); Bhattacharya, Farris, and Ferguson (2022); Hensman (2022); Miranda Mora, (2019, 2022).

The diversity of the analyses and strategies of Marxist feminists to address the diagnosed problems of social reproduction vary across space and time. The (often) unacknowledged situatedness of the issues identified explains the shortcomings in diagnosing the problems and proposing solutions for *all* women. Analyses from the Global North tend to emphasise the unwaged housewife's labour, reflecting the nature of the labour market in the historical moment and geographical location of the XIX–centuries in Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States. In the Global South, domestic servants and unwaged housewives did not decline like in Europe. Contrarily, independence and decolonisation struggles did not end colonial servant and slave relations. Although in most countries, slavery was formally prohibited, new kinds of servitude and domesticity were renewed by postcolonial elites who continued to enforce new kinds of unwaged service and coerced exploitation (Van Nederveen Meerkerk *et al.*, 2015).

The shift in attention of the Marxist feminist scholarship from the Central Western, white, male factory worker to the housewife was deepened by the introduction of the concept of the subaltern subject, based on Antonio Gramsci's analysis of the peasants. In the 25th prison notebook, "On the Margins of History. History of Subaltern Groups", Gramsci (2011) addresses non-hegemonic collectives. The term refers to those subjects who had yet to be integrated into the industrial, capitalist system. For him, subalternity is produced by economic oppression as well as by social, political, and cultural subordination. Building on this notion, Postcolonial theory departs from Gramsci's concept to broaden the scope of analysis by extending the conceptual framework beyond a focus on rural peasants and farmers to include all marginalised and excluded groups, whether based on race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, disability or religion. The concept of the subaltern addresses Marx's omission of servant labour and refers to those sections of society that the universal logic of the capital failed to assimilate. Subaltern Studies scholars<sup>4</sup>, have shown that the dissolution of the peasant class during the rise of capitalism in Europe and North America was contrary to their ongoing reproduction under capitalism in the Global South and took another trajectory in the non-Western world (Dhawan, 2018).

Feminist approaches from the Global South, along with anti-racist, anti-imperialist, and anti-colonial positions, have criticised and extended Marx's political economy and thickened the notion of emancipation. Postcolonial and Decolonial feminist scholars<sup>5</sup> such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Séverine Durin, and Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, address the disparate operations of modernity, capitalism, and patriarchy by globally tracing the divergent emergence of cultural, political, and economic practices and institutions. By highlighting the distinctiveness of the postcolonial world, scholars from the Global South challenged the claim that humans share common needs and interests independently of situated and concrete differences to understand better their specific forms of oppression, exploitation, and violence (Mohanty, 2003a, 2003b). The denial of common universal interests shared by all human beings irrespective of race, gender, sexuality, religion, or other differences has led them to affirm that capitalism, modernity, and patriarchy differ in the postcolonial world, i.e., disparate configurations of family, community, society, market, and state (Dhawan, 2018). Hence, political and collective action does not derive from any essential universal human nature and a shared political consciousness; somewhat, it is substantiated by particular needs, interests, desires, and aspirations historically, culturally, and economically constituted (Spivak, 2014).

Against this background, Postcolonial and Decolonial feminisms embrace the challenge of applying Marx's categories to analyse specific and contextualised embodied experiences of women and subaltern subjects, illuminating the contexts and temporalities in which poor, black, brown, rural, trans, queer and indigenous women continue to be employed in domestic and servant's labour. This intersectional<sup>6</sup> and situated focus on diverse women's local and daily life experiences guided many feminist theories to a less considered feature of labour, the embodied and affective dimensions of social reproduction: care. In its origins, the concept of care can also be traced to the "ethics of care", a cluster of theories that stress the importance of responding to the individual in opposition to ethical theories that emphasise generalisable standards and impartiality, i.e., deontologist and consequentialist. In her book *In a Different Voice* (1982), Carol Gilligan holds that the difference between care-based and justice-based ethical models is due to gender differences, questioning ethical objectivity as a masculine perspective on morality. Although care ethics is not synonymous with feminist ethics, a lot has been written about care ethics as a feminine and feminist ethics, such as motherhood and kinship relations, resembling the ideal of white middle-class women developed in the nineteenth century (Tronto, 1990). However, for the purpose of this analysis and based on the case studies mentioned above, this approach to care is insufficient, not only because of its structural risk of essentialism, i.e., failing to explore how women differ from one another, and thereby offering a uniform and homogenising picture of moral development that reinforces sexist stereotypes (Tronto, 1994); but primarily because of its restricted moral approach to the individualistic, private and intimate spheres of life (whether it is framed according to virtuous motives or communicative skills), losing sight of the structural and social dimension of care, i.e., political and

<sup>4</sup> Ranajit Guha, Partha Chatterjee, Dipesh Chakrabarty, and Gayatri Spivak, among others.

<sup>5</sup> Although postcolonial and decolonial feminisms have different and sometimes divergent genealogies and programs, i.e., they come from different intellectual traditions and emphasise distinct aspects of the colonial experience; this paper focuses on their commonalities. I understand both theoretical frameworks and movements as intellectual critiques and militant practices that analyse and aim to subvert the legacy of colonialism and imperialism.

<sup>6</sup> Intersectionality refers to the analytical lens used to study how individuals and groups are located differently within intersecting oppressions, i.e., they have distinctive standpoints on social phenomena (Hill Collins, 2017). It addresses how intersecting axes of discrimination and power systems shape individuals' and group experiences and identities.

economic dimensions. In this sense, caring as practice and a relation entail power and conflict and raise practical questions about justice, equality and freedom.

According to a political and economic approach, care is relational (the interaction between care and cared for), an embodied experience (needs, capabilities, emotions, sensations and functions), and fundamental in the subjectivation processes of individuals and groups. It refers to all the activities that provide physical, psychological, and emotional wellbeing as a foundation for making and maintaining life. The diverse research on care moves away from the approach that conceives the (re)production of life as a sole mechanism for reproducing the next generation of workers. In that manner, care goes beyond comprehending reproductive and care practices solely as commodified services or (un)waged labour (Esteban, 2017; Tronto, 2013). In this manner, reproductive labour and care are both fundamental conditions for (re)producing life and social relations articulated around gender, kinship, and age (Esteban, 2017). Against the framework of Postcolonial and Decolonial feminist theories, care is not a value, disposition, or virtue; instead, it is a practice, a kind of labour, and a particular social relationship embedded in power relations determined by material conditions. The focus on care's normative dimension, as an ideal that guides normative judgement and action, is not central to these frameworks but rather a form of affective and embodied work or what I call *caring labour*, i.e., a social practice determined by ascribed social values. Care, therefore, implies cultural variation and extends beyond family and domestic spheres to social institutions and ties characterised by political and economic relations.

Moreover, grounded on a critique of neoliberal individualism and the capitalist market, the concept of care broadens the notion of life relations beyond human relations. It distinguishes between interpersonal reciprocity, social interdependence, and ecological dependence. In this sense, it includes everything we do to maintain, contain, and repair our world (our bodies, ourselves, and our environment) to live in it as well as possible (Fischer and Trono, 1990). This approach further develops the Marxist framework centred around relationships based on needs and relations of domination to connect them to its embodied dimension of affects, desires, and aspirations (Esteban, 2017; Svampa, 2015; Herrero, 2017). In this manner, it extends the scope of analysis beyond the forced institution of heteronormative motherhood and the bourgeois family to its institutionalisation and externalisation in the state and on private and global markets. Therefore, care is no longer only the work performed in the household realm (Tronto, 2013). The commodification of care, however, has not resulted in the socialisation that early and contemporary Marxist feminists have been struggling for. Hence, to avoid an essentialist and a mechanistic view of social reproduction and care, contemporary theories should be grounded in the experiences of actual working subjects. In what follows, I focus on one particular subject: the migrant worker. I argue that given the current challenges posed by the feminisation of migration and the increasing global care chains, nothing short of the reconceptualisation of a Deco- and Postcolonial Marxist feminist political economy can address the problems that arise from the current care crisis and the pitfalls of Western theories of social reproduction and care.

### **The Neocolonial Feminisation of Migration and Working Women's Resistance**

The current global care crisis highlights the increasing difficulties that large segments of the population face when caring for themselves and others or when being cared for (Pérez Orozco and López Gil, 2011; Ezquerro, 2011). The crisis of care consists of the systematic undermining of social reproduction by capitalism, comprehended as an economic and social order (Fraser and Jaeggi, 2018). This is part of a general crisis encompassing economic, ecological, social, and political features that intersect with and exacerbate one another. The current tensions are not accidental but have deep systemic roots in our socio-political and economic structure. Every kind of capitalist society harbours a contradiction: on the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other hand, the orientation of capitalism towards unlimited accumulation tends to destabilise the processes of social reproduction it relies on (Fraser, 2016). This crisis tendency undermines the same processes of the social reproduction of natural and human life. The processual character of the care crisis reveals that the dominant Western model from the Global North is no longer viable and that the upcoming model is being determined at the margins by peripheral countries, mainly in the Global South (Pérez Orozco & López Gil, 2011).

Since the care crisis mainly affects Western countries (the US, Canada, and Central Europe), domestic and care work has also globalised, producing global care chains. These networks of transnational dimensions are formed to maintain daily life (Pérez Orozco, 2009). Chains represent a series of links (composed mainly of (trans) women or feminised bodies) through which care is transferred from one household to another. In its simplest version, a chain could consist of a German family that hires a Mexican woman to care for a family member who needs constant assistance. The hired woman, who has emigrated to provide an income for her family, leaves her sister-in-law in her country of origin to care for her children. These transnational relations consist of at least three kinds of women: middle- or upper-class women in destination countries, migrant domestic and care workers, and women who are too poor, old, or sick to migrate (Salazar Parreñas, 2000). Chains encompass three essential links: the migrant household, the employer household, and the household of origin (Durin, 2017, p. 241). The double transfer consists of starting paid care work in the place of destination and delegating care work to the place of origin while continuing to provide remote care. The extension and assembly of the chains depend on the intrafamilial distribution of care, the existence or absence of public services, the influence of the business and the private sector, the regulation of paid domestic service, and migration policies, among others. Care chains combine multiple modalities of reproductive labour and care tasks in diverse spaces, including the market, the household, and public or private non-profit institutions (such as schools, nursing homes, care facilities for disabled people, hospitals, hospices, funeral homes, etc.) (Pérez Orozco, 2009).

The allocation from the periphery to the centre, from the North to the South, contributes to sustaining the economic growth of post-industrialized countries (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007). For peripheral countries, this phenomenon implies the outsourcing and/or commodification of domestic and care tasks that women used to perform for free, or that cannot be performed anymore due to the current precariousness of wages in the destination countries (Fraser, 2016; Pérez Orozco, 2009). In countries at the centre, women have gained significant access to the market, and the neoliberalisation of states has transferred the responsibility of reproductive and care work to individuals and the private market. All this happens while inequalities between the North and the South widen, the precarisation of waged labour increases, and supranational actors increasingly organise and regulate domestic and care work (World Bank, International Labor Organisation, United Nations, etc.). Global migration and transnational relations are crucial to the contemporary reproductive and care labour regime. Women's movements across borders and their incorporation into global markets to perform domestic and care work, as well as in arranged marriage and trafficking for the sex industry, have led to the feminisation of migration. Women's migration from the South to meet the needs of the North, or from poorer countries to wealthier countries, for instance, from Eastern to Central Europe, means that women are now increasingly more likely to migrate to take up jobs rather than join male family members as dependents. The demand and supply for migrant women's labour are defined by hierarchical social structures enforced by the capitalist and neoliberal labour market.

Global care chains confirm not only the persistence of gendered definitions of womanhood, defining (un)waged labour, but also expose the limits of the home/family and waged work framework to address global dynamics and the contemporary labour market. Moreover, it shows that these boundaries have always been fluid for poor and racialised women. Feminist frameworks and struggles formulated within the discourse on labour rights (the right to pension, etc.) and the liberal redistributive economic framework (the demand for equal pay, etc.) face new challenges to address the versatility and specificity of capitalist and neoliberal exploitation in connection with violent racial, imperial and gendered oppression. Domestic and care labour regimes organised by class are structurally linked to racial, gender and colonial regimes that transfer these tasks to women whose identities have been previously defined and assigned in their countries of origin and countries of destination (Salazar Parreñas, 2000).

The examined research on the feminisation of migration and the globalisation of domestic and care labour reveals the processes of normative heterosexuality, declassification, infantilisation, and racialisation they are made subject to, justifying their exploitation and violent treatment (Durin, 2017; Bautista, 2010). Traditional and binary notions of femininity, masculinity, sexual orientation, domesticity, and family continue to play an essential role in forming women's identity by segregating spaces, imposing places of work, and relying on kinship relationships that presume not only a sexual division of labour but a definition of womanhood as natural caregivers whose reproductive capacity demands their heterosexuality. Women are always defined by their relation to men in marital and familial ties as mothers, housewives, and sisters. Their life cycle determines their labour trajectory and migratory processes, i.e., their mobility is circumscribed to specific motivations defined by gender roles, stages of reproductive ability, types of skills connected to management and attention, as well as ways of living demarcated by their kinship relationships (Durin, 2014a). Based on these oppressive and violent mechanisms and relations, women's labour is defined as temporary, complementary, and unqualified.

The reviewed case studies of Mexican, Indian, and Filipina migrant women working in the Global North also show that gendered notions of domestic and care work intersect with interpersonal and group dynamics that reproduce colonial relations of subordination, extreme exploitation, abuse, and sexualised violence. Domestic work is the most servile form of reproductive and care work, which in most cases constitutes an ethnicised and racialised labour niche due to the rural, peasant, and indigenous origins of most of the migrant workers (Durin, 2020; Mohanty, 2003a). The heteronormative and gendered definition of domesticity and care shows not only the masculinisation of the notion of labour and the invisibilisation of women's work in the household, the factory, the sweatshop, the family business, the plantation, etc., but neglects and denies women's subjectivity by defining them as victims of tradition, religion, or culture, denying them any form of agency (Abu-Lughod, 2002; Mohanty, 2003b).

In destination countries, for instance, feminised and migrant labour is conceived as unskilled and easy, like following a recipe and grounded on the idea that migrant women possess specific personality traits such as tolerance, patience, ignorance, or immaturity, portraying them as children who must be educated or civilised. These characteristics are assumed and constantly reproduced as necessary conditions for tedious and repetitive work that only a particular kind of person can perform. The employer household considers migrant women docile, lenient, and satisfied with substandard wages (Mohanty, 2003a). In addition, the tasks performed are identified by employers as a kind of work that only women from less developed regions and poorer classes can do, whether this is the case or not. The instances of Mexican and Philippine women show how migrant women are not only infantilised but also underdeveloped, i.e., this is also the case of southern, middle-class, and educated women who migrate to perform care labour as *au pairs* and who are perceived and treated as being poor and uneducated (Durin, 2014b). These examples show to what extent the gendered and racialised domestic and care regime is part of a contemporary and global *recolonisation* process through labour and migration (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Mohanty, 2003a). Current international relations continue to be profoundly shaped by the power relations inaugurated in the conquest, established under modern colonialism, to the extent that despite the formal independence of colonised countries, the contemporary global order can be described as a colonial, uninterrupted order that has taken on a new form (Mohanty, 2003b;

Quijano, 2000). This neocolonial system of political domination, economic exploitation, and social violence is, in a fundamental way, sustained by the feminisation of migration.

Decolonial theory's focus on the critique of the ongoing structures of coloniality that sustain Western dominance has set the ground for a richer analysis of how post or new forms of colonial structures of exploitation and domination have continued to shape the world in the Global South. Latin American scholars<sup>7</sup> have developed a rich framework to understand the enduring patterns of power, control, violence and domination, grounding modernity and coloniality's entanglement. This broader structure persists in global power relations, knowledge systems, and identities, i.e., as coloniality of power, knowledge, being and gender (Maldonado-Torres, 2016). The identification of the "darker side" of modernity, i.e. coloniality, also means a call for challenging and dismantling its structures and relations (Mignolo, 2011). Here highlights De(s)colonial Feminisms from Latin America, whose particular attention to the forms of oppression experienced by indigenous, afro-descendant and other marginalised women<sup>8</sup> in *Abya Yala*<sup>9</sup> led them to develop a more multifaceted approach that accounts simultaneously for race, class, and gender oppression and advocates for epistemic decolonisation, autonomy, and the defence of the body/territory and community as a central feature of their struggles. De(s)colonial feminism's emphasis on the importance of collective resistance and community-based struggles promotes community wellbeing, solidarity and collective action, in contrast to certain strands of Western feminism, such as the early approaches to care ethics framed within the individual and private sphere.

In this context of neocolonial global relations and despite the unjust contemporary care regime, global care chains encompass an ambivalent reconfiguration process. The same processes grounding exploitative and oppressive relations provide the basis for collective and organised action grounded in everyday needs, interests, desires, and aspirations of the migrant worker, challenging the traditional union method based on the class interests of the male worker as an insufficient strategy for feminist and transnational solidarity networks. The shared experiences and working conditions across geographical and cultural divisions have enabled domestic and care workers in most Western countries to achieve different labour rights, i.e., social security, minimum wage, overtime pay, rest breaks, and safer working conditions. However, despite the high importance of these reforms, they seem insufficient for the kind of change that feminists are struggling for. Nonetheless, this only holds if we understand these achievements as mere legal and normative transformations. The conceptual shift in the recognition and regulation of housewives' and servants' unpaid and forced labour to domestic and care work, and their practical strategies of organising and mobilisation, have led to a shift in consciousness and politicisation, allowing them to see themselves as racialised workers and women, rather than as entrepreneurs who control their activities in the informal market or as "natural" carers. Moreover, the collectivisation of their particular interests and affects into various kinds of networks, alliances, and cooperatives has enabled the layout of emancipatory strategies and alternative practices necessary to envision and enact transnational feminist solidarity (Mohanty, 2003a).

The case of women who migrate out of economic necessity or due to contexts of extreme violence to perform domestic or care work sets in motion a series of transformative processes and dynamics. Global care chains are traversed by subversive relations (among humans and nature)<sup>10</sup> and practices promoting historical and political agency (Goldsmith, 2001). Concrete cases and experiences of indigenous, rural, and subaltern Mexican, Indian and Filipina women reveal the fundamental role of collectively addressing shared problems and needs to formulate joint demands and concretising expectations against sexual harassment, for better working conditions, for redefining their tasks and services or substantiating their aspirations for a decent and dignified life, for example (Bautista, 2010; Durin 2020, 2017, 2014; Goldsmith 2000, 2001, 2013, 2018; Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2007; Mohanty 1988, 2003; Salazar Parreñas 2000, 2001; Pérez Orozco 2009, 2011). The organisation of women workers into unions has been only one of the various ways to address and engage with their needs, desires, affects, and aspirations to translate them into concrete agendas for social change. The capacity to aspire, understood as the subject's competence to navigate by the coordinates (norms) of the (social) map, qualifies subjects to explore trajectories for transformative action (Appadurai, 2004, 2007). For racialised migrant women workers, formalising their shared interests into specific demands to the state or international organisations allows them to identify the contradictions they face as (trans)women, workers and racialised subjects, as well as the challenges of achieving local solutions or addressing urgent problems. Thus, although in their daily work shifts, they experience an exploitative, discriminatory, forced, precarious, and violent domestic and care regime, simultaneously, this scenario sets the conditions for life-changing and joint action that goes beyond the local and nation-state levels.

<sup>7</sup> Such as Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Enrique Dussel, María Lugones, and Nelson Maldonado-Torres, among others.

<sup>8</sup> Especially concerning sexualised violence, exploitation and expropriation, human trafficking, marginalisation and vulnerability, among others. Key figures of this diverse stream are Yuderky Spinoso-Miñoso, Julieta Paredes, Ochy Curiel, Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, Breny Mendoza, Aura Cumes, Carmen Cariño, Lorena Cabnal, Sylvia Marcos, Mónica Millán, Raquel Gutierrez, among others.

<sup>9</sup> Abya-Yala is a "Kuna" indigenous population word that means "place of life". Today, Indigenous movements from Antarctica to the Arctic Pole claim "Abya-Yala" as the name of the continent they inhabit (Mignolo, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> In another work, I analyse how women's subordination is intertwined with nature's domination. Departing from the question of the role that gender has played and is playing in the eco-social crisis, I examine the link between the current eco-social crisis and the crisis of care as two sides of the same problem. I also explore reproductive work and care as a form of resistance to contemporary eco-social crises (see Miranda Mora and Chaparro, 2024).

The feminisation of migration, whether within national or international borders, is connected to processes of subjectification mobilised by affects and embodied experiences. The reviewed empirical research on the work-life course of migrant women from the Global South shows that migration is not a mere survival strategy grounded in their fears or insecurities about the future but reveals a set of desires and aspirations such as social mobility, the pursuit of equal treatment, and respect based on the quality and merit of their work or the realisation of a good life and of dignified labour (Durin, 2014a, 2020; Mohanty, 2003a). By engaging with their aspirations, they have reversed their imposed condition of invisibility, bursting into and capturing the public space. By addressing their desires, their voices are rendered audible, challenging their enforced condition of silenced victims and infantilised subjects. By challenging the sexual division of labour, the intrinsic inequalities of the global labour regime, and the intersectional forms of oppression enforced in migration, they defy the gendered and racialised neocolonial labour and migration regime, affirming themselves as historical and political agents. By the collectivisation of desires and aspirations, domestic and care workers formulate local, regional, and transnational solidarity networks, acting as activists across borders (Goldsmith, 2013, 2018; Durin, 2020). This is the case of the *Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers* (Conlactraho for its acronym in Spanish) (1988),<sup>11</sup> the world's first regional organisation of domestic workers, which represents an extraordinary example of how political and legal literacy is simultaneously a condition and an effect of their struggles and challenges as well as their engagement and strategies towards broader social change. Another outstanding case in Europe is the transborder associations *Territorio Doméstico* and *Las Kellys*, whose initial struggles for rights drove them to dispute decision-making processes within the state, reclaiming a seat in formulating and reforming public policies.<sup>12</sup>

### The Ambivalences of the Global Care Chains: Challenges and Prospects

The politicisation and organisation of working-class women in the context of the neocolonial feminisation of migration and reconfiguration of the Western care regime face numerous challenges. A central concern of Decolonial and Postcolonial feminists underscores the tension between the democratic grammar, the rule of law, and the socio-political location of migrant women to ensure their inclusion as citizens. To avoid the reproduction of subalternity, inclusion must go beyond their formal conversion into political and legal bearers of rights and duties, and emancipation must be formulated on the grounds and beyond the framework of citizenship to include economic autonomy and gender and racial justice. Individual rights are insufficient to transform structural and systematic mechanisms and relations that threaten social and natural reproduction and (non)human life unless they are based on material changes (redistribution of wealth, etc.). Interventions by migrant women, such as the assessed case studies of Mexican, Indian and Filipina women, demonstrate that marginalised and excluded subjects engage with their future based on desires and aspirations. Grassroots organisations and collectives of migrant women, such as the *Latin American and Caribbean Confederation of Domestic Workers* or *Territorio Doméstico* and *Las Kellys*, aim to alter the terms of social and political recognition and power relations and achieve economic independence. In this sense, the crucial role of situated and embodied experiences proves fundamental for enabling strategic alliances beyond individual self-interest, the fragile bond of the shared need, and the mere instrumentalisation of the ally. Hence, collective and emancipatory strategies emerge to materialise political solidarity networks transnationally and transborder.

In combination with civil society, transnational cooperation and cross-border networks have undoubtedly facilitated women's participation in local and global politics, i.e., the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) (2006, 2009, 2012), the first membership-based global organisation of household and domestic workers. The IDWF played a fundamental role in advocacy and research to launch the International Labour Organization C189 Domestic Workers Convention (2011). Still, the risk of being co-opted by global capitalism or elite interests is permanent, i.e., the feminist analysis of the contemporary labour standards regime, exemplified by the International Labour Organization's (ILO) Core Labour Standards (CLS), exposes how the CLS was designed to work within a broadly neoliberal model of development: a model dependent on the increased vulnerability and flexibilisation of employment, reinforcing gender and racial inequality. However, the gender- and race-blind, neoliberal-compatible approach to economic rights articulated by the CLS in the language of human rights imposes a moral and normative approach that cannot be adequately realised within the current unequal structures of global social hierarchies (Elias, 2007; Elias and Hayley, 2009). Universalist values or principles, or merely normative solidarity projects, risk falling into complicity with the global structures of domination they pretend to resist. Incorporating local struggles into *one* universal movement risks reinforcing the neoliberal or neocolonialist agendas by presupposing a general or formal notion of womanhood, sisterhood, development, progress, or civilisation.

The problem of universal solutions for the emancipation of (trans)women everywhere is that they render invisible the differences by way of which hierarchies and inequalities are enforced. Hence, it is crucial to continue to stress the embodied experiences of migrant women, racialised and feminised subjects, which are meant to correct biases, ignorance, and arrogance and to guide emancipatory projects built on local

<sup>11</sup> This alliance brings together local organisations, unions, and national federations from 11 Latin American countries. Conlactraho is composed of about 30 organisations (plus two national federations). The partner countries are Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, Peru, Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Canada, Dominican Republic and Uruguay.

<sup>12</sup> The Inter-territorial Assembly of Domestic and Care Workers in Struggle disputed in July 2022; the Spanish government closed negotiations regarding the ratification of Convention 189 from the International Labour Organization to demand transparency and an active role in creating public policies (García-Navarro and Gutiérrez-Cueli, 2023)



histories and concrete cases of resistance and struggle from below. This means transforming our conception of domestic or care workers as objects of charity (of the state, NGOs or international organisations) into historical and political agents whose organisation and politicisation *move* them not only out of need but also into solidary alliances and emancipatory projects based on desires and aspirations for radical social and economic change. Political solidarity should avoid establishing unequal relationships between those who give justice, goods, and rights and those who receive them. It is a kind of collectivism among (trans)women workers across gender, class, race, and national boundaries, grounded on shared material needs, interests, and embodied desires and aspirations. To achieve the radical social change (trans)feminism aims at, domestic and care workers must remain the protagonists of their struggles. Their subordinating, co-optation, or coercive alignment to unions, parties, NGOs, academics, or hegemonic feminist agendas can only once again mean a failure for feminism both in the Global North and South.

As it has been shown, a theory capable of challenging the contemporary neocolonial and neoliberal capitalist system that shapes the current social organisation of domestic and care labour enforced by the feminisation of migration must address the heteronormative and racialised notion of labour and deepen the entanglement between political economy and domination and oppression theories. Focusing on racialised migrant women workers through Decolonial and Postcolonial feminist theories allows for a better understanding and more sophisticated theorising to address the problems arising from current social reproduction and care accounts to explain the contemporary care crisis. The embodied and affective experiences of domestic and care workers show that different forms of exclusion, discrimination, abuse, and violence, in addition to exploitation, maintain local and global processes of capitalist recolonisation through migration. Global care chains display the current crisis of the global society centred on labour while simultaneously setting *in motion* alternative forms of relations of interdependence, reciprocity, ecocodependence, and solidarity, anticipating what might be the transition from a society structured around work to a form of labour organised around situated collective needs, aspirations, desires, and interests to foster care for all forms of life. Transnational and transborder solidarity deployed in global care chains is an exceptional example of solidarity from below, as they avoid establishing unequal relationships between those who give justice, goods, and rights and those who receive them.

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