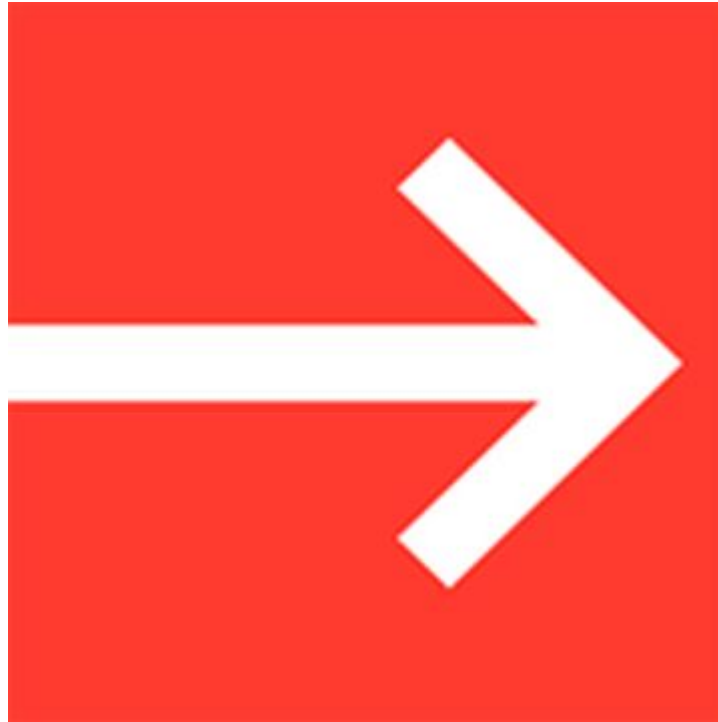


Care at the Intersection of Mobility and Gender/Sexuality Regimes nccr – on the move

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Following the COVID-19 pandemic, problematic past legacies emerged from the intersection of mobility and gender/sexuality regimes. By diving into these continuities, I examine two compelling case studies – domestic caregivers and sex workers. These cases allow me to study how a global, but also a national, crisis of care emerged and highlight their historical foundations. While this crisis became clearly visible and debated during the pandemic, it disappeared again from the public agenda in the so-called post-COVID period.

The pandemic clearly exposed some problematic aspects of the current care system. In particular, it highlighted the limitations of a model of care that relies heavily on female, racialized and migrantized labor, while also underlying global wage gaps and pervasive inequalities. The issue of care lies at the intersection of mobility and gender/sexuality regimes and therefore offers important insights into the intricate interplay of processes involving migrantization, racialization, exclusion and inequality.

Regimes of Mobility – Regimes of Gender/Sexuality

I understand by “regimes of mobility” all the mechanisms that divide human mobilities into categories and hierarchies – whether at the [European, national but also subnational or local levels](#) (Dahinden et al. 2023). Two regimes of mobility in particular are of interest in the care context: one that is tied to nation-state borders and includes the [technologies of](#)

[migranticization](#), i.e. the form of human mobility commonly referred to as “migration.” And a second, the mobility regime that was developed in the wake of the pandemic to regulate internal mobilities within nation states to contain the spread of COVID-19.

By gender or sexuality regimes, in turn, I understand all categorizations and hierarchies that are the result of the perception of differences between the sexes, and hence, in the Global North, often a binary (and dichotomous), cisgender, mostly heterosexual and heteronormative matrix (Butler 1990; Walby 2020). Gender and sexuality are facets of individual identities and subjectivities. However, they go far beyond the personal sphere by being connected to societal norms, practices and structures that articulate power dynamics, thus giving rise to inequalities and exclusion. This complex interplay is particularly well illustrated in the care sector.

Domestic Care Givers

A key feature of the gender regime is that it is based on an (international) gender division of labor that assigns men to the economic sphere and women to the domestic one. In this way, the domestic care sector becomes positioned at the interface between the gender regime and the (here national) mobility regime, resulting in many migranticized women working in the care sector of the Global North.

This dependency on migranticized, female labor is particularly high in private households. To give an example, in countries like Switzerland, it is almost exclusively female migranticized care workers who are employed as live-ins for older people in need of care. They usually shuttle back and forth between their homes abroad and their workplaces in seniors' households in Switzerland (Schilliger, Schwiter, and Steiner 2023).

During the pandemic, national border closures and mobility controls highlighted this fundamental role of “paid” and “unpaid” care work in the functioning of societies and economies. Previously undervalued workers suddenly became critical and their work and services “essential” (Thompson 2023). For instance, while the older population is most vulnerable to the virus and those who provide care are indispensable, border closures stopped (temporarily) the transnational circulation of care workers (Leiblfinger et al. 2021).

A survey on the impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers in 14 Latin American countries revealed a massive employment and social crisis among domestic workers, with about half of the participants having been dismissed or suspended with no access to social protection (Acciari, del Carmen Britez, and del Carmen Morales Pérez 2021). At the same time, border closures restricted them from returning to their countries of origin to care for their families, which in turn increased their economic vulnerability. Interestingly, in this situation, we can assume that it was often « local » women who took over the care work instead of the migranticized, female domestic workers.

Research from all corners of the globe demonstrated that asymmetrical distributions of care obligations in households that existed before amplified during the pandemic, resulting in a disproportioned burden for women and a widening of the gender gap in

domestic labor (Kabeer, Razavi, and van der Meulen Rodgers 2021). As a consequence, we could see, so to speak, the development of a new configuration of the global care chain (Hochschild 2002), an inverted, upside-down one that de-migrantized care work – while it remained feminized. In other words, what used to be paid care work (migrantized, female domestic workers) became unpaid care work (“local” women taking over the care work while it became unpaid), while remaining in the hands of women.

Sex Workers

The sex industry, serves as another example of the care crisis, albeit from a slightly different perspective. Sex work is, at least in part, care and emotional work, as theorized by Ehrenreich and Hochschild (2003), and Chapkis (1997). Among sex workers in Europe, there are known to be many migrantized and racialized people. In Switzerland, for example, we find many Eastern European women, but also women, men and transgender sex workers from all over the world. The demand for migrantized and racialized sex workers is a result not only of global inequalities and migration regimes, but, it is at least partly based on certain gendered and at times postcolonial (or post-socialist) representations of the exotic « Other » (Chimienti 2009).

Similar to care workers, this group of [people often lost their jobs](#) during the pandemic due to contact and social distancing measures resulting from internal mobility arrangements – [and even those who moved their work online suffered economic losses](#). [Studies](#) also reported violence, forced deportations, and increased stigmatization, discrimination and repressive racist policing and racial profiling. In [Switzerland](#), which benefits from liberal legislation on sex work, some cantons had banned it in the wake of the pandemic, by using the crisis to introduce new anti-sex-work policies.

In Bright Light: The Need for a Redefinition of Care Work

The situation of domestic care and sex workers is of course different in many aspects, but there are similarities: For both, the intersection of mobility and gender/sexuality regimes increased their precariousness during the pandemic. Second, we can see that long-established inequalities – a consequence of established gender/sexuality regimes – were reinforced during the pandemic. This interacted with mobility regimes to create significant exclusions.

The focus on “production” which underlies the current capitalist system, rather than on sustainable care for human life, devalues care work and those who do it, mostly (migrantized) women. At the same time, gendered undervalued and underpaid work is an integral part of the economic system; capitalism would not function without it, [as feminist economists](#) have argued for decades. To paraphrase in an old-fashioned way: there is [no production without reproductive work](#).

What is astonishing is that this care crisis, which was very visible and publicly problematized during the pandemic, has now disappeared from the public debate again in the so-called post-COVID period – although these past legacies are of course still very

present. The conclusion to value this feminized, often migrantized care work is obvious. However, this would require not only a redefinition of care work (which would challenge the capitalist system), but also of mobility regimes and their underlying gender regime.

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This blog post is part of our series « [Towards a Novel Mobility Regime](#). »

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