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POLICY TRANSFORMATIONS



CHINA
**THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON DOMESTIC
WORKERS AND POLICY RESPONSES**

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DRAFT for discussion

POLICY
TRANSFORMATIONS

REGION: ASIA	POLICY AREA: ● CARE AND SOCIAL PROTECTION ● LABOUR POLICIES AND WORKERS' RIGHTS
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Using a feminist intersectional and interlinkages approach, this project closely examines policy changes that have taken place during the period of exceptionality produced by the pandemic, exploring how they may impact the future in four policy areas: macroeconomics; labour policies and workers' rights; migration and human mobilities, care and social protection.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ILO **International Labour Organization**

PPE **Personal Protective Equipment**

USD **United States Dollar**

DRAFT for discussion

I. ABSTRACT

Starting from a feminist intersectional lens, the paper investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic workers and related policy responses in China. The study was conducted using qualitative method which includes in-depth interviews of domestic workers and responsible persons in domestic service intermediary agencies and social organisations.

The study shows that the pandemic has had both short-term and long-term negative impacts on domestic workers' job security, income, and perceived risk of job loss, particularly among live-out workers. Live-in workers' working conditions and psychological health have worsened during the pandemic. The findings suggest that while domestic workers' pre-pandemic work and employment conditions were shaped by the intertwining effects of gender, class, and inequitable labour and migration policies, the pandemic added additional precarities to their economic livelihood, working conditions and psychological well-being. This study lends support to our hypothesis that state policies related to care and social protection during the pandemic have remained stagnant and path dependent, recent labour and demographic changes may create opportunities for transformative policies to improve labour and social protections of domestic workers in China.

II. INTRODUCTION

Demographically, China is in a stage of rapid population aging, low fertility, and small family size. Meanwhile, the shift of care responsibility to the family, the high labour force participation of women, and rapid income rise have created increasing demand for domestic services. These trends, together with the large-scale rural-to-urban migration, have given rise to a highly feminised labour force for domestic services. According to the estimate of the International Labour Organization (ILO), China is home to twenty-two million domestic workers, accounting for more than twenty-nine per cent of domestic workers in the world (ILO, 2021). About eighty per cent of domestic workers are female rural-to-urban migrants and local farmers (Wang and Wu, 2016; Sa et al., 2020).

While domestic workers play an increasingly important role in fulfilling the care needs of urban families, their rights and interests as care labourers are largely neglected in China's institutional context. The vulnerability of domestic workers is closely related to the inadequacy of state policies and regulations in the first place. The main focus of the policies for domestic services is to reduce poverty, increase employment, stimulate economic development, and satisfy the care needs of urban households. More than ninety per cent of domestic workers are informally employed with no labour contracts and are not under the protection of the Labour Law (Liu, 2017; Sa et al., 2020). The labour process of domestic workers in private households is complex and "hidden", but regulation and supervision of family employers are not in place. Furthermore, the household registration system (i.e., *hukou* system) segregating rural and urban residents exacerbates domestic workers' vulnerability. Under the *hukou* system, rural-to-urban migrants are secondary in the urban labour market and have limited access to urban social security systems. Facing multiple social and economic exclusions, domestic workers in general have insecure jobs, relatively low pay, extended working times and low levels of social protection (Liu, 2017; Sa et al., 2020).

Given their high proportion of informal employment and work on the frontline of the COVID-19 crisis, domestic workers worldwide have been hardest hit by the pandemic (ILO, 2021). China's domestic workers are no exception. China is the first country to

experience the outbreak of the pandemic. The government's strict restrictions have brought the epidemic under control in a relatively short period of time. However, the few studies on China show that most domestic workers experienced job and/or income losses during the lockdown, and many had serious worries about job security after the peak restriction period (Beijing Hongyan Social Work Service Center, 2020; Xing, 2021; Yu et al., 2021).

Despite the pressing needs, there is a lack of policy concerns for domestic workers in China during the COVID-19 pandemic. The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic workers' work and livelihood and related policy responses. Using a feminist intersectional lens, the study pays close attention to the intertwining effects of gender, class, and institutional barriers (i.e., policies for labour and internal migration) on multiple precarities that domestic workers face during the pandemic. We would expect informally employed domestic workers to be particularly vulnerable to the COVID-19 shocks, since they are less likely to benefit from government's relief measures. Through the case study, and by examining the hypotheses proposed by DAWN's analytical framework (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021) we intend to shed light on the policy process – whether it is path dependent or not, what makes policy responses slow or progressive, and what form of changes are desirable – so as to provide policy recommendations for domestic workers' labour and social protections in China.

III. DATA AND METHODS

Domestic work in this study, following the ILO's definition (2021), refers to work performed in or for a household or households, within a formal or informal employment relationship. Domestic workers in China typically undertake care for children, the elderly, sick and disabled, cleaning, cooking, and other household chores.

While the focus of this study is the impact of COVID-19 on domestic workers and policy responses, a review of domestic workers' pre-pandemic conditions and related policies allows us to gauge the effect of COVID-19 on the existing precarities of domestic workers in China. The analysis on the pre-pandemic condition of domestic workers is based on a

review of existing literature. To investigate the impact of the COVID-19 crisis on domestic workers, we conducted in-depth interviews with twelve domestic workers in Beijing in April 2020, and four domestic workers in Nanjing in July 2021, following a new wave of outbreak or infections there. We also interviewed three managers of domestic service intermediary agencies, and two responsible persons of social organisations that provide social support to domestic workers in July 2021. Findings from the qualitative data, however, cannot be generalised to represent conditions of domestic workers in China.

IV. CONTEXT

The central concern of this study is to reflect upon policy transformations related to domestic work during and after the pandemic. As a way to approach it, we focus on two alternative hypotheses: 1) policy responses to domestic workers during the pandemic are stagnant and path dependent or 2) transformative and progressive (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021). Before we look into the pandemic's impact on domestic workers, it is critically important to provide a review of domestic workers' socio-demographic and work profiles and their institutional and cultural underpinnings in the pre-pandemic period.

IV.1 STUDIES ON DOMESTIC WORKERS IN CHINA

Similar to most countries in the world, domestic workers in China represent a highly feminised and socially disadvantaged group. While previous studies estimate that women make up ninety per cent to ninety-six per cent of domestic workers in China (Wang and Wu, 2016; Tong, 2017), a recent survey conducted in three citiesⁱ indicates that between ninety-six per cent and ninety-eight-point eight percent of domestic workers are women. The mean age of domestic workers in the three surveyed cities is around fifty years, indicating a trend of aging for this part of the labour force (Sa, 2021). A majority of domestic workers are middle-aged, married, rural-to-urban migrant women, and have junior-high school or lower education (Wang and Wu, 2016; Sa, 2021).

Despite government's push for the formalisation of the domestic service industry in recent years, domestic workers are predominantly employed informally. Studies based on random sampling methods indicate that less than two per cent of domestic workers are formally employed who have signed labour contracts (Worker's Daily, 2019; Sa et al., 2020). Consequently, a large majority of domestic workers do not have access to employment-based social security. A previous study (Sa et al., 2020) found that that only about one point two per cent of domestic workers in Beijing and Jinan have unemployment insurance, and their enrolment rates for employee's medical and pension insurances are three point three per cent and three point seven per cent, respectively. While a majority of domestic workers have enrolled in urban or rural residents' social insurances, five point one per cent and seventeen point two per cent do not have medical or pension insurances.

Due to the lack of regulations and monitoring for family employers, domestic workers' working conditions in private households are not protected. They work longer hours, earn less, and have unstable jobs compared with other workers (Wang and Wu, 2016; Liu, 2017; Mo, 2018; Sa et al., 2020). It is hard for them to negotiate working times and workload as there is no clear boundary between work and life, particularly for live-in ones. Live-in workers work more than thirteen hours per day and eighty-three hours each week on average. More than one-third of domestic workers change employer in the past year, among which forty-six point four per cent change two or more employersⁱⁱ (Sa et al., 2020).

Domestic work is devalued as it is considered low-skilled and an extension of the unpaid care work which is usually provided by women. The study by Dong et al. (2016) reveals that domestic workers earn twenty per cent less than other types of service workers with the same human capital characteristics. Despite the increase in the past few years, domestic workers' income still remains low even compared with other informal workers. The average hourly pay of domestic workers in Beijing is lower than the local minimum hourly wage of informal workers (Sa et al., 2020). The labour devaluation is particularly salient among eldercare workers who are considered to perform "dirty work" (Wu, 2018). Dong et al. (2016) show that the hourly wage of eldercare workers is thirty-four point five per cent and twenty-eight per cent lower than that of other service workers and domestic

workers, respectively. Other findings show that eldercare workers in Beijing and Jinan earn sixty-two per cent and seventy-four per cent of the local minimum hourly wages for informal workers (Sa et al., 2020).

The hidden labour process in private households and the informal employment relations render domestic workers vulnerable to different types of labour rights violations (ibid). First, the deprivation of rest time is prominent, particularly among live-in workers. More than twenty-eight per cent domestic workers in Beijing did not take a single day off each week and twenty per cent did not take days off on public holidays in the previous year. Second, their rights to compensation can be violated. A majority of domestic workers in Beijing work overtime without receiving the level of compensation required by the Labour. There are five point five per cent of domestic workers who have received no compensation for overtime work on weekends and six point five per cent who have received no compensation on public holidays Third, domestic workers' personal safety and health can be endangered while working in private households. Eleven point eight per cent of migrant domestic workers in Beijing reported having been insulted/intimidated, and four point four per cent reported having been sexually harassed by their employers in the previous year (ibid).

Another salient feature of female domestic workers in China lies in the conflict of their productive and reproductive roles. Female domestic workers are the main economic provider of their family as indicated in previous study, fifty-eight per cent of them have contributed to more than half of their household income (ibid). Under the traditional division of household labour, they also hold main responsibilities for family care. Female domestic workers, migrant workers in particular, experience intensive conflict between their work and family responsibilities. While more than half of female migrant domestic workers have had difficulties with the education or care of minor children, about one-fourth of female domestic workers reported having problems dealing with parental care (ibid).

IV.II SOCIAL POLICIES SURROUNDING DOMESTIC WORKERS IN CHINA IN THE PRE-PANDEMIC PERIOD

This section reviews China's policies for care, labour migration, and domestic workers so as to provide an overarching framework within which to understand domestic workers' employment and work conditions in the pre-pandemic period and to analyse relevant policy transformations during and after the pandemic.

IV.II.I TRANSFORMATION OF CARE POLICIES IN THE REFORM ERA

As China embarked on a transition from a planned to a market economy in the late 1970s, national care policies underwent dramatic transformations. In the pre-reform era, in order to increase women's labour force participation, the state and urban employers (*work unit*) played a role in care provision along with families. Urban families enjoyed subsidised childcare services provided through their work units. Support for care of the elderly and the sick was also provided through pensions, public healthcare, and subsidised housing (Connelly et al., 2018).

The post-reform period witnessed the dismantling of social provisions and the shift of care responsibilities from the state to urban households (Tong, 2017). Economic decentralisation and the privatisation of state- and collective-owned enterprises brought an end to the era of "cradle-to-grave" socialism and lifetime employment. The substantial decline in the support from the state and work units for childcare and eldercare has led to the undertaking of care responsibilities by women in individual households or on an intergenerational basis (Connelly et al., 2018). The shift of care responsibilities is supported by Confucian patriarchal values that emphasise traditional gender roles and consider care provision as women's natural duty (Cook and Dong, 2011).

IV.II.II INTERNAL LABOUR MIGRATION AND SOCIAL PROTECTION

Prior to the 1980s, China had for more than two decades strictly restricted rural-to-urban migration as a part of its state-led industrialisation. The household registration system, implemented in the late 1950s, registered people by their birthplace as rural or urban hukou status. The *hukou* system is the central institution that enforces rural-urban segregation of resource distribution including employment, social welfare and social services (Cheng & Selden, 1994). While restrictions on rural-urban labour mobility were

gradually relaxed after the 1980s, the hukou system and the rural-urban division of welfare provision persisted. Migrant workers faced substantial difficulties accessing secure jobs, social security and social services in destination cities, and many of them left children behind in rural areas.

In the past two decades, the state has taken a series of policy measures to expand the coverage of rural social safety nets and integrate rural populations into urban social security systems (Li, 2011). In 2010, the State Council announced that the hukou system would be replaced by a system of residence permits that enable rural residents to enjoy the same social security benefits as urban residents. While the gradual delinking of the hukou status from access to social security has benefited some migrant workers, the large number of informally employed migrant workers' access to social security and social services in urban areas remains limited (Li, Y. et al., 2021).

IV.II.III POLICIES RELATED TO DOMESTIC WORKERS

The domestic service industry emerged in the early 1980s and expanded rapidly in the past decade. By 2018, China's domestic service industry produced a revenue of 576 billion Yuan (equivalent to USD 87 billion) and is expected to maintain an annual growth rate of twenty per cent (People's Net, 2019). The state and women's federations have played important roles in the development of the domestic service industry. In the early stage of its development, the main task of the state was to ease the double burden of work and family care of urban households and solve the problem of unemployment for urban laid-off workers (Tong, 2017). In the early 1980s, All China Women's Federation called for women's federations across the country to organise domestic service agencies (Liu, 2017). Since then, women's federations collaborated with labour departments to facilitate labour export and training of rural women to deliver domestic services in cities. In 2000, the Ministry of Labour and Social Security issued the "National Occupational Standards for Domestic Service Providers", which for the first time recognised domestic work as a formal occupation (Liu, 2017).

Since 2009, the state considered the domestic service industry as an important part of service industry and the development of domestic industry as one of the government's important tasks (Liu, 2017). The state launched a "domestic service project" that provided skills training and placed jobs to domestic workers through private intermediary agencies. In 2012, the state promulgated the "Interim Measures for the Administration of the Household Service Sector", which is the only legislation regulating the domestic service sector but is poorly implemented. The Interim Measures explicitly defined family employers as "consumers" of domestic services rather than employers of domestic workers. This is consistent with China's Labour Contract Law which does not include family employers into the category of "employer". The current legal framework excludes the informally employed domestic workers from the protection of the Labour Law while shielding family employers from their responsibilities to domestic workers (Liu, 2017).

After 2017, the focus of the state is to upgrade the quality and capacity of domestic service industry (State Council of the PRC, 2019, No. 30) by expanding employment, strengthening training, and establishing leading domestic service enterprises. While the state emphasises the formalisation of domestic workers and starts to pay attention to labour rights protection, it did not take any substantive measures to push forward these policies.

The above discussion reveals that the main focus of state policies on domestic services in the pre-pandemic period has been to promote employment and poverty alleviation, stimulate economic development, and ensure a quality and sufficient labour supply of domestic services for urban families. Women's federations of all levels have actively involved in the development of the domestic service industry as part of their tasks to support the state's policy. However, policy concerns for the rights and interests of domestic workers are far from being adequate such that labour and social protections for informally employed domestic workers are unavailable and regulation of family employers is not in place.

V. IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC ON DOMESTIC WORKERS AND POLICY RESPONSES

This section first presents China's policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis followed by an exploration of the impact of the pandemic on domestic workers' work, health and livelihood, with a focus on both short-term and long-term effects and distinctive implications for live-in and live-out domestic workers.

V.I CHINA'S POLICY RESPONSES TO THE COVID-19 CRISIS

Soon after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, China took quick measures to expand access to healthcare benefits. It ensured free testing, extended a medical benefits package to include drugs and medical services necessary for COVID-19 treatment, and made medical treatment accessible to those who were not insured, irrespective of their ability to settle co-payments. In addition, the government ensured that medical facilities received the funds needed for treatment in advance, to prevent any exclusion from care due to financial constraints (ILO, 2020; Maya Stern-Plaza et al., 2021). These health protection measures, if implemented properly, could possibly play an important role in narrowing the gaps between informally employed domestic workers and other workers in their access to healthcare and sickness benefits directly related to the COVID-19 infection.

With regard to economic relief measures, the state has provided cash transfers and income tax exemptions for formal employees who suffered significant economic loss due to reduced working time during the pandemic. In addition, the state provided some economic relief measures for enterprises to resume work and production. In February 2020, the central government issued a new tax policy to extend the carry-on period of tax from a maximum of five to eight years for enterprises that were greatly affected by the pandemic. Later in May 2020, the state put forward a relief measure of reducing rent for the hardest hit small- and micro-enterprises including domestic service intermediary agencies. Some local governments had followed suit and introduced tax reductions and exemptions for domestic service enterprises, as well as reductions and exemptions of social insurance premiums for tax payers who provide household services for a certain period of time (Yu et al., 2021).

V.II SHORT-TERM ECONOMIC AND HEALTH IMPACTS

V.II.I ECONOMIC IMPACT

The COVID-19 outbreak occurred first in Wuhan, the capital of Hubei province in January 2020. To avoid large scale spread, the government took closure measures nationwide at the end of January 2020, when most migrant domestic workers went back to their hometown to spend the Chinese Lunar New Year holiday. The lockdown from February to the early May of 2020 prevented domestic workers from returning to work. Migrant domestic workers who returned to cities had to take a fourteen-day quarantine at their own cost before they could go back to work. Thus, the outbreak had immediate negative impacts on domestic workers' employment and livelihood.

There is no systematic study of the pandemic's economic impact on domestic workers. A few studies show that about seventy to eighty per cent of domestic workers have stopped working or lost their jobs at the peak restriction period (Beijing Hongyan Social Work Service Center, 2020; Yu et al., 2021). While restricted mobility and perceived health risks are main reasons for their immediate stop or loss of jobs during the peak restriction period, drastic reduction in service demand has also played an important role as most employers either worked from home or were afraid of getting infected (Xing, 2021; Yu et al., 2021).

While the emergency economic relief measures are helpful for intermediary agencies and their formal employees to overcome financial difficulties, informally employed domestic workers barely benefit from them. Manager Liu of a small intermediary agency in Jinan said: *“Even for a small enterprise that has 8 or 9 employees like us, it's a heavy burden to pay social insurance premiums. So the reduction of social insurance premiums is very helpful for us.....but this policy only benefits formal employees, not domestic workers.”* In fact, all of the domestic workers interviewed reported not having received any cash transfer or benefitted from reductions or exemptions of social insurance premiums over the period of the COVID-19 crisis.

While there was no official call for family employers or domestic service enterprises to provide financial assistance to domestic workers, some agencies negotiated with employers to provide some compensation to domestic workers. As manager Li from a domestic service company in Nanjing told us: *“We would communicate with customers like this.....because of this disaster not her own reasons, A’yi (meaning nanny in Chinese) stopped working for two months. She came out to find this job because her family really has economic difficulty. A’yi worked at your home last year, if you are satisfied with her work, would you give her some compensation?”* Some agencies reduced intermediary fee to workers, as mentioned by Chen who is a live-in childcare worker in Nanjing: *“After we went back to work last year, our company only charged us a little intermediary fee. Because we lost income for a period of time, they understand our hardship and feelings.”*

V.II.II HEALTH IMPACT

With regards to the health impacts, the immediate problem came from the lack of access to personal protective equipment (PPE) for several months after the outbreak. The frontline and face-to-face work performed by domestic workers makes it crucially important for them to be protected. The public health agencies provided guidelines for the prevention of COVID-19 to domestic workers immediately after the outbreak. Both family employers and intermediary agencies required workers to wear masks, but they did not provide any protective materials (Yu et al., 2021). Hongyan Social Work Service Center’s survey of migrant domestic workers in Beijing (2020) shows that fifty per cent of them needed help in obtaining masks and other PPEs. As manager Li reported:

“Because of last year’s serious shortage of protective materials, A’yi had to prepare (masks) themselves. We told them since you work at customer’s home you must take protective measures, don’t take off your mask during work.....There are so many workers, you couldn’t count on the company to provide protective materials...Some nice customers would give A’yi some masks sometimes.”

Another common health problem that is noted in existing studies and has emerged in my interviews is the psychological stress that domestic workers have encountered during the lockdown due to anxieties over loss of jobs, income, and family livelihood. A survey (Beijing Hongyan Social Work Service Center, 2020) indicates that 88.9 per cent of migrant domestic workers have worried about the impact of the pandemic. Chen who had stayed in Hubei province during the lockdown expressed her concerns: *“We are migrant workers. All of a sudden, the family has no income, and the epidemic is so serious. We were really worried that we couldn't get out when we were trapped there.”*

The outbreak of the COVID-19 has had particularly negative health impacts on live-in domestic workers. The working conditions of the live-in became even worse during the lockdown. Most live-in workers interviewed reported heavier workloads either because their employers had a higher requirement for cleaning and disinfection or due to the lack of help from family caregivers. As live-in eldercare worker, Su, in Beijing told us: *“My*

workload becomes heavier during the pandemic. The elder's children sometimes came and helped a bit before, but now they can't come. I have to take care of her myself. I'm so tired.” Another eldercare worker in Beijing, Shi, who had stayed in the hospital to take care of an old woman shortly after the outbreak, reported: *“In the hospital is not the same as at home, more tired here.....Each patient's family can only leave one person here, and other family members are not allowed to come.....At home when I've done the work, I can take a short rest. I get up at 5:30 in the morning and work until 9 o'clock in the evening here.”*

It's common for live-in eldercare workers to report high level of psychological stress due to rigid restriction and lack of break during the lockdown. As Su said: *“They (employer) don't let me go out because I take care of the elderly. Although there isn't so much change in my work, I feel stressful and tiring. If I can take four days off each month like before and go out to relax, my mood will be different.”* The mental health condition of Shi was even worse: *“I feel like being jailed here. I can step out the ward only when I need to get hot water. We're not allowed to leave this room otherwise.”*

V.III LONG-TERM ECONOMIC AND HEALTH IMPACTS

V.III.I ECONOMIC IMPACTS

It comes as no surprise that domestic workers suffer from long-term economic impacts of the pandemic. While data about the recovery rate of domestic services is unavailable, two of my interviewees who are managers of intermediary agencies in Jinan reported that only about seventy per cent of domestic workers resumed work after the peak restriction period. They observed that some have quit domestic work due to the uncertainties and precarities of carrying this work in the pandemic period.

In large cities like Beijing and Nanjing, it seems that the majority of domestic workers resumed work after the peak restriction period. However, whenever there was a sporadic small-scale outbreak, the work of live-out domestic workers was interrupted immediately. According to manager Li: *“About 50 per cent of live-out A’yi in our branch have stopped working due to this new wave of outbreak (in Nanjing in July, 2021). If there is one infected found, the entire neighborhood is closed. Now I have an order here, but I can’t arrange it because it’s risky.....A customer asked if I can guarantee A’yi is not infected. This A’yi has tested negative twice, but I still can’t guarantee. So A’yi stopped her work at his home.....Many part-time A’yi are panic about not being able to work again.”*

The job stability of live-in domestic workers has also been affected. Maternal care workers are more likely to experience job instability during the pandemic as found in other studies (Xing, 2021). As manager Li explained: *“Maternal care workers have difficult go to work now. Many of them are migrants from other provinces. Some have to go back to their hometowns after they finish one monthly order. It is difficult for them to travel across cities now.”* Another cause of live-in workers’ job stability lies in the decreased demand for services. As manager Liu observed: *“Because customers are also affected by the economic downturn, they now tend to hire part-time workers instead of live-in ones. They think live-in workers cost too much.”* Chen has changed three employers since she resumed work in May 2020. She told us: *“They are migrants (her first employer after the outbreak) who work hard to buy their own house here. Their life is not easy..... When the closure is relaxed and their children grew older, they hired a part-time domestic*

worker and quitted me.” Other domestic workers around her are also concerned about uncertainties in work and life. As she said: “If the pandemic is not over, I’ll always be worried. It’s much harder to find a good employer now than before. Those who do this work all have economic hardship just like us. At this age, we need to support children and old-age parents.”

V.III.II HEALTH IMPACTS

The pandemic has also inflicted longer-term negative impacts on live-in domestic workers’ working conditions and general wellbeing, particularly extended working time and heightened psychological stress. The interviewees mentioned that they could no longer take regular work breaks during the pandemic, and this had become a common practice among live-in workers. As manager Li mentioned: *“After things went back to normal last fall, many employers asked A’yi not to go home during the weekend. They can pay for A’yi’s overtime work on weekends or ask A’yi to save break time together.”*

However, the lack of weekly breaks has a tremendous negative impact on live-in workers’ emotional health. As Chen said: *“I plan to save two days from last month to take a rest this month. But now I am trapped in Nanjing and can’t go back home again. I feel depressed……. A colleague of mine used to take two days off each month. Now she can’t take break either, which makes her feel stressed out.”*

Eldercare workers who stayed in the hospital during the pandemic are the most vulnerable group in terms of both extended work time without breaks and psychological stress. Hospitals have taken extremely restrictive measures to prevent transmission. Even after the peak restriction period, the rigid restriction on the mobility of care workers who stay in the hospital remains. Thus, care workers have to work longer hours and forgo all work breaks during the whole period of the pandemic. Two male eldercare workers who have been staying in the hospital reported that they had not taken a single day’s break since the outbreak. A male eldercare worker Liu in Beijing said: *“Doing care work in the hospital during this period is so hard. The psychological pressure is so big that I feel like burning out. My colleagues around here have same feelings.”* Chen had worked for a while as an eldercare worker in the hospital last year. She also said: *“Having close contact with patients in the hospital made me really worried about the risk of the epidemic. The air and environment in the ward were very bad too. It may not be good for my health. I felt very scared.”*

VI. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION

The study demonstrates that the current pandemic has had both short-term and long-term negative impacts on domestic workers' work, health, and livelihood. While live-out domestic workers experienced short-term job and income losses due to lockdowns, all domestic workers perceived the risk of job and income insecurity as a result of restricted mobility and decreased service demand over the entire period of the pandemic. The study also shows that the pandemic had worsened live-in workers' working conditions and psychological well-being, even after the peak restrictive period had ended. The empirical findings, together with the contextual background, suggest that while domestic workers' pre-pandemic conditions were shaped by the intertwining effects of gender, class, and inequitable labour and migration policies, the pandemic intensified their precarities with regards to working conditions, economic livelihood, and psychological well-being.

VI.1 STAGNANCY AND PATH DEPENDENCY OF POLICIES RELATED TO DOMESTIC WORKERS

The present study lend support to our hypothesis that state policies related to care and social protection of domestic workers during the pandemic shows stagnancy and path dependency. First and foremost, the lack of policy responses to domestic workers' social protection is closely related to the state's social policies. Since the beginning of China's reform, the state prioritises economic growth and efficiency while lowering labour standards and relegating the provision of welfare to the household to keep expenditures on labour and social protections low (Connelly et al., 2018; Huang, 2020). The economic reforms – while bringing about rapid economic growth and poverty alleviation – have dramatically increased social inequalities, particularly between rural and urban residents, the formally employed and informally employed (Dong and Cook, 2010; Li, S. et al., 2013).

Labour rights and interests of domestic workers who belong to a part of China's large number of informally employed workers have not been a focal policy concern for a long time. The national labour standards stipulated in the Labour Law covering issues such as labour contract, remuneration, working and rest hours, paid leave, wage arrears, maternity leave and allowances are even more strict than the international labour standards set forth in the Decent Work for Domestic Workers Convention (NO. 189) (Liu, 2017). But the Labour Law only apply to less than ten per cent of formally employed domestic workers,

and more than ninety per cent of informally employed domestic workers are not protected by it. Thus, a vast majority of domestic workers are excluded from the government's emergency economic relief measures during the pandemic period.

Second, domestic workers' vulnerabilities during the pandemic can also be attributed to the gender bias in state's policies. Care work is a public good because the time and effort involved in the daily work of caring for others are essential for the capabilities and well-being of individuals as well as the functioning of society and the economy (Folbre and

Nelson, 2000). Globally, most care work is done by women. Even when it is paid there is often a low value assigned to it. Women's overrepresentation in the poorly paid care labour force undervalues their work and leads to lower levels of employment-related social protection (McCrum, 2021). The neglect of gender in the care policy and policy responses to the COVID-19 crisis reflects a deep-rooted gender bias in the policy making process that prioritises production and male-dominated work and underplays social reproduction and female dominated work (Bahn et al., 2020).

Third, the lack of policy responses is also a result of weak social dialogue for domestic workers in China (Yao et al., 2014). Due to state's control of the trade unions and the workplace of domestic work in private households, a predominantly majority of Chinese domestic workers are not unionised (Liu, 2017). Thus, there is a lack of voice of domestic workers in the public space. Women's federations are the formal representation for the rights and interests of women. As part of their tasks to support the state's policy for the domestic service industry, the main focus of women's federations lies in the promotion of employment and poverty alleviation of poor rural women and laid-off women workers through providing domestic services to urban families. In doing so, women's federations pay more attention to the gender identity of disadvantaged female domestic workers, whereas the worker's identity and related rights and interests of this group are neglected. Discussions about female domestic workers' labour issues are largely absent from the public discourse.

V.II PROGRESSIVE POLICY RESPONSES

Despite this being so, the study shows that the government's policy responses on health protection can be regarded as progressive to some extent. The expansion of health and medical care protection related to the COVID-19 epidemic during the pandemic ensured that uninsured and poorer people could get access to testing and treatment free of charge. As a result of unprecedented levels of financial and political support, the health toll directly linked to the COVID-19 epidemic was drastically decreased among all people including domestic workers throughout the entire period of the crisis. This policy response may narrow the gaps between informally and formally employed groups in terms of health risks related to the pandemic due to their pre-existed differential access to health resources.

Nonetheless, the policy response in health protection during the pandemic is a short-term crisis relief measure. More than eighty per cent of domestic workers are rural residents whose health premium levels are much lower than those of urban residents. Therefore, the short-term health protection policy responses could not fix persistent inequalities in access to health services between informally employed domestic workers and their formal counterparts.

V.III SPACE FOR POTENTIAL POLICY TRANSFORMATIONS

Recent labour and demographic changes may open social space for possible policy transformations to improve labour and social protections of domestic workers in China. There are about 220 million informally employed workers in urban China, accounting for 63.2 per cent of urban employees, among which more than eleven per cent work in the social service sector including domestic services (Huang, 2020). This category of workers increases dramatically with the rapid growth of the new forms of economy such as the express delivery industry and domestic service platforms, particularly after the outbreak of the COVID-19. In response to the large number of labour rights disputes involving informally employed workers, the government is making effort to develop inclusive policies to improve labour and social protections of informal workers. In July of 2021, the state issued the Guidelines for Protecting the Labour Rights and Interests of Workers Employed in New Forms of Economy (Ministry of Human Resources and Social Security

of the PRC, 2021, [No. 56]). The regulation requires to formalise the employment relations for platform workers, set standards for informally employed workers' remuneration, access to social insurances, occupational safety and health, and other working conditions particularly working time, and integrate rural migrants into the urban social security system. As part of this effort, Shenzhen started a new policy to cover some informal workers' work-related injury insurances including domestic workers who find jobs through intermediary agencies. Cities such as Hangzhou and Chongqing removed barriers for rural migrants' enrolment in social insurances in the destination area.

Rapid population aging, fertility decline, and small family size have brought about recent population and social policy reforms that allow married couples to have three children, and push for the shift of elderly care provision from individual family to home- and community-based services. One of the most urgent concerns related to these demographic changes is China's care deficits. It is estimated that the number of people with demand for domestic services is 45.6 million in 2018, and this figure will increase to 139 million by 2035 (Mo, 2017). The situation may create opportunities to raise the recognition of the value of care work and improve labour and social protections for domestic workers. Two of my interviewees from NGOs providing social services to domestic workers keenly anticipate this possibility, and plan to take advantage of this opportunity to collaborate with women's organisations and other governmental organisations to provide trainings and conduct social advocacy that may open spaces for real policy changes.

While the study reveals that domestic workers in China have faced multiple precarities during the COVID-19 pandemic period, a discussion about the following possibilities for transformative policy responses for domestic workers' labour and social protections provide a starting point for reducing these precarities.

First, it is imperative for the government to change its development approach and to pay more attention to social equity. Greater commitments are needed to promote the social protection for domestic workers as part of the government's large policy initiatives to extend social security to informal workers.

Second, it is critically important to formulate special laws or regulations to protect the labour rights and interests of domestic workers and to regulate the behaviour of family employers to make them conform to the international labour standards for domestic workers.

Third, the government should change its mindset and place gender at the centre of its policy-making process aiming at solving the problem of care deficit. In this regard, more research evidence about the negative impacts of lack of social protection on female domestic workers' well-being is helpful to inform policy making.

Fourth, it is important for All China Women's Federation to play more active roles in the policy advocacy for domestic workers' labour and social protections. Women's federations of all levels need to play a bridging role between the government and domestic workers in the policy advocacy so as to ensure the voices of workers are heard.

Finally, social organisations working with domestic workers need to promote social advocacy targeted at changing social norms that devalue care work that is mainly performed by women.

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ENDNOTES

ⁱ Using respondents’ driven sampling (RDS) methods (Heckathorn 1997), we conducted a questionnaire survey of 2,120 domestic workers in Beijing, Jinan, and Changcha which includes information on domestic workers’ socio-demographic characteristics, working conditions, employment relations, access to social security and so on. The survey data provide unbiased estimations of domestic workers’ characteristics in Beijing and Jinan (detailed description can be found in Sa et al. 2020).

ⁱⁱ The figures do not include domestic workers who work on an hourly basis and maternal care workers who usually work on a monthly basis.

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