

DAWN *Informs*

**POLICY TRANSFORMATIONS
IN TIMES OF COVID-19**



DAWN Informs is DAWN's periodical publication showcasing the organisation's latest analyses, critiques and commentaries.

DAWN provides an analytical framework that has changed the terms of the debate on women's issues worldwide. Its continuing analyses of the interlocking, systemic crises of debt, deteriorating social services, environmental degradation, food insecurity, religious fundamentalisms, militarisms and political conservatisms grows out of the experiences of poor women living in the countries of the economic South.

DAWN Informs is a space for the free circulation of these ideas and has been issued since the 1980s.



DAWN is a network of feminist scholars and activists from the economic South, engaged in feminist research, analysis of the global environment, working for economic and gender justice, and sustainable development.

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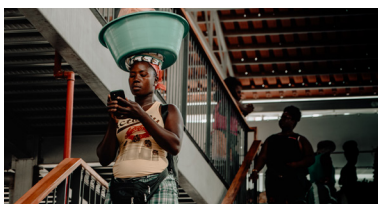
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Photo | Denis Ngai, from Pésxds

INTRODUCTION

**POLICY
TRANSFORMATIONS
IN TIMES OF COVID-19**

*by Masaya Llavaneras Blanco
& María Graciela Cuervo
(With the invaluable contributions of
Yálani Zamora & Damien Gock)*

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During the first months of the pandemic DAWN felt the need to make sense of the drastic political changes that were happening right in front of our eyes. This led to the development of a research project on Policy Transformations in times of COVID-19. Not only were we witnessing the worst health crisis in generations, but we were also bearing witness to drastic economic, political and social transformations. There was a shared sense among activists that these transformations were taking place while the majority of the world was too busy trying to survive to actually pay attention. This is why we produced an Analytical Framework and collaborated with feminist activists and researchers of the global south, to produce relevant and timely analyses of changes that were occurring in four main policy areas: macroeconomics, care and social protection, labour rights, and migration and human mobilities.

The product of this collaboration is a rich collection of twelve case studies from Asia-Pacific, Africa, Latin America and the Caribbean. The cases explored the policy transformations that were taking place using four working hypotheses:

- 1) Business as usual:** policies implemented in the context of the pandemic were a continuation of already existing schemes, often a product of strict macroeconomic limitations to what could be done;
- 2) Increased corporate capture:** policy responses have intensified the privatization of service provision and the reduction of public services;
- 3) Increased biopolitical control:** given the quick transmissibility of COVID-19, governments reduced freedom of mobility and increased control over social gatherings and living arrangements; and our most hopeful hypothesis,
- 4) Moving towards progressive, feminist policies:** given the dimensions of the crisis, governments embarked on bold policy shifts directed toward gender equality, democratic politics, egalitarian distribution of resources and access to services.

Business as usual, but worse

A key concern that emerged is the reduction of public provision and the weakening of the state's role as guarantor of rights, alongside the expansion of the private sector. In the case of India the country underwent the replacement of all existing labour laws (thirty-five in total) without any significant democratic oversight. This drastic change of legislation brought about dramatic regressions for workers' rights such as the extension of the workday from eight to twelve hours and the extension of the existing ban on strikes and other forms of democratic protest. Not only did the state dramatically recede its responsibility to guarantee the rights of workers to the private sector, it reduced social spending at the same time.

The effects of path-dependent approaches run the risk of tarnishing policies that could otherwise be considered transformative. In the case of South Africa, the creation of new cash transfer policies and the expansion of existing ones are perceived as potential first steps toward a Universal Basic Income Policy. However, there are two critical obstacles for this to happen: 1) the amounts provided were too small to have a significant effect on the population, and 2) these grants were funded via the reallocation of funds originally assigned to other policies, therefore running the risk of defunding already weakened public provisions to fund new ones. These limitations reflect the stronghold of austerity politics in influential sectors of the South African government.

Austerity politics also played an important role in the case of Ghana, which focused on the temporary closure of a School Feeding Program during the period of pandemic-induced school closures. Instead of finding alternative ways to deliver meals to children beneficiaries, the funds assigned to the program were reallocated to other age groups. No alternatives were devised to sustain the food security of school-age children, thus increasing the economic and labour strain of households, especially on women and girls.

The cases of Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago speak to the effects of a business as usual approach in a context of structural crisis. Like in most cases, cash transfers were one of the main policy responses to the socioeconomic effects of the pandemic. Even if the expansion of cash transfers is relatively effective at attending to the immediate consequences of the drop in households' income, it is insufficient to address the structural inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic. In both cases (and around the world) the labour exploitation of women was intensified through school closures, as well as the exclusion of informal workers from cash transfer policies. These gendered exclusions were imbued in

class and racist dynamics, in which women who are poor and work as domestic workers are marginalized in ways that replicate colonial patterns of exploitation of black women.

Path-dependent racist colonial legacies also played a role in the case of Bolivia. The country was in a significant political crisis at the beginning of the pandemic, which eventually eased after the presidential elections in late 2020. In that convulsed context, Bolivia implemented a set of four universal cash transfers. Even though universal access to services and rights is a value that we strive for, the Bolivian case found to shed light on the fact that *Bono contra el hambre*, the most significant cash transfer in place, was biased in favour of urban and non-indigenous populations. This meant that in practice, a significant portion of rural and indigenous communities was marginalized from the policy. It is expected that indigenous women were particularly affected.

Mobility controls had gendered and antimigrant effects

The biopolitical effects of the pandemic are illustrated by the racialized differences between who access care and support and who does not. It is also manifest in the **increased biopolitical control** over mobilities and living arrangements of different groups. Border closures and lockdowns caused significant disruptions for everyone but were particularly damaging for international and internal migrants, informal workers and especially domestic workers. **The cases of China, Jamaica and Malaysia** describe how domestic workers faced job losses or the impossible choice of not returning to their own households in order to remain employed.

A strong anti-migrant sentiment was exacerbated by the pandemic, associating migrants with the spread of COVID-19. In some cases, such as **Malaysia's**, this was further intensified by public policies. There, an Emergency Ordinance increased the powers of the military and led to large-scale arrests and deportations of migrants without valid documents. In this context, migrant domestic workers found themselves depending on the goodwill of their employers, subject to increased exploitation, and often lacking access to food and other basic items.

Border closures were critical in **the cases of Chile and Kiribati**. In the **Chilean case** the pandemic was preceded by an intense period of social mobilisation. The pandemic thus provided the perfect scenario for the reducing of civil liberties, as well as increasing the

criminalization of migration and the militarization of the border. These changes affected irregularized migrants, especially from Haiti and Venezuela, who found themselves stranded at border-crossings, excluded from systems of social protection, or afraid of being deported.

I-Kiribati seasonal workers experienced a different form of forced immobility in Australia and New Zealand. They found themselves stuck in Australia and New Zealand during the first period of the pandemic. During this time, the workers experienced decreased wages and working hours and were mostly excluded from social protection systems. Unable to return home, the minority of women seasonal workers found gender-specific challenges including, for example, pregnancy and giving birth in destination countries. Their situation shed light on the colonial legacies and path-dependence of Pacific temporary migration schemes that offer limited labour protection and have insufficient to no provision for workers' reproductive rights.

Glimpses of hope

Despite the historical challenges that were documented by all these case studies, there are glimpses of hope that emerge from community organizing and everyday struggle. For example, **the Chilean case** is a case of cross-movement organizing and migrant solidarity. Migrant domestic worker unions in **Malaysia** were able to increase their numbers and push for policy changes in the midst of growing authoritarian practices.

The case of Barbados speaks to the possibility for small island nations to innovate amid structural limitations. While implementing an IMF structural adjustment program, Barbados has been experimenting with different policy responses to break away from fiscal austerity, including increasing the minimum wage and creating a temporary cash transfer for families in need. Even though there are questions regarding the transformative potential of these policies, there is a sense of hope and creativity in the midst of structural constraints.

The case of Argentina, sheds light on the development of an innovative National Care System which actively incorporates community organizations as relevant actors in the social organization of care. Even though this emerging care system had been under discussion well before the pandemic, the COVID-19 crisis propelled the importance of care into the main policy debates in the country. One of the main innovations of

this policy transformation is including the territorial perspective whereby care policy making is discussed and shaped at the community level by community members.

This DAWN Informs on Policy Transformations hopes to contribute to collective global conversations about where our societies are heading at this time of rapid changes and great uncertainty. The articles included show a complex portrait of a global system in which political spaces are weakened and under significant strain by austerity politics and growing authoritarian practices. Alongside these worrying elements, they present energetic social mobilizations of solidarity that are pushing for change in favour of policies and politics that include the needs and aspirations of women and girls, migrants, workers, racialized, impoverished and rural communities. Mobilizations that truly seek alternative ways of doing development in the current junction. 🌟



Masaya Llavaneras Blanco

Masaya Llavaneras Blanco (Venezuela) is an Assistant Professor of Development Studies at Huron University College, University of Western Ontario (Canada). She holds a Ph.D. in Global Governance from Wilfrid Laurier University-Balsillie School of International Affairs (Canada) and a MSc. in Women Studies from the Universidad Central de Venezuela (Venezuela). Her advocacy and research include issues of care, time-use, and gender budgeting. Most recently, she is focusing on the struggle for the rights of migrant domestic workers and the rights of people on the move in the Global South. She has collaborated with DAWN in different capacities since 2010 and joined DAWN's Executive Committee in 2020.



María Graciela Cuervo

María Graciela Cuervo is DAWN's general Co-Coordinator and a member of its Executive Committee. In 2011 she participated in the DAWN Training Institute for young feminists and since then has engaged with the organisation in advocacy, social mobilization, and alumnae networking. A lawyer by training, she has focused her work on human rights, women's rights, labour rights, and the right to education. Before joining DAWN, María Graciela was the Programme Officer of the International Council for Adult Education, a global network that advocates for youth and adult learning. She has worked as a Researcher and Project Coordinator at CIPAF, one of the Dominican Republic's oldest feminist organisations, and served as the International Relations Director of the Dominican Ministry of Labour.



Photo |

**PANDEMIC,
PATRIARCHY
AND PRECARIETY
IN INDIA:
Labour, Livelihood
& Mobility Rights
in the context of the
COVID-19 pandemic**

*Ritu Dewan
(With invaluable research
inputs from Aruna Kanchi)*

Analysis of the impact of the pandemic and an uncompassionate State response is located within four major spheres that are simultaneously independent yet interconnected – labour policy and worker rights, mobility and migration, social protection and societal rights, and of course macroeconomic structures and fundamentals. The pandemic struck at a time when the process of gendered de-development and de-equalisation in India had gathered momentum in the last several years (Dewan 2020; Dewan and Sehgal, 2018).

The first ‘policy’ response was the imposition of a brutal three-week nation-wide complete lockdown on 25 March 2020, with a mere four-hour notice. Millions were stranded, internal migrants being compelled to walk thousands of kilometres. No State support whatsoever was forthcoming – no food, no shelter, no transport.

India’s case study for the Policy Transformations project analyses the morphology of labour and mobility, focusing on the lack of a sensitive policy response. The consequences include a fall in employment (Actionaid, 2020; IWWAGE, 2020); decline in the intensity of work and drop in wages, migrant and single women and also transgender persons being more severely impacted (Agnihotri and Hans, 2021; AIDWA, 2020; Mohan, et al., 2021; ISST, 2021; SWAN, 2020); collapse of incomes, increased poverty, food insecurity, erosion of savings and indebtedness (CII and APU, 2021; Deshpande, 2020). India now accounts for 57.3 per cent of the global rise in pandemic-induced poverty and 59.3 per cent for the middle-income category. The emergence of what I term as ‘collateral’ inequalities has and will deepen patriarchal divides. These include domestic violence (Kapoor, 2021); fall in age at marriage (Bahl, et al., 2021); and ‘COVID’ widows and orphans.

The case study also contextualises the gendered policy response of a macro-patriarchal State. I use the lens of Feminist Finance (Dewan, 2019) to unravel macroeconomic fundamentals including relief measures, revenue-raising, expenditure, allocations and

subsidies that affect both paid and unpaid work. India already records among the highest time poverty (Dewan, 2017), the burden of unpaid work now rising even more sharply (IMPRI, 2020). Budgetary allocations for Financial Year 2020-2021 were underutilised, the fall in food subsidies being one-third. The current budget has reduced allocations to poor and women-centric sectors: agriculture and allied activities; micro and small enterprises; rural employment; nutrition; and education. The focus of the several government ‘relief’ packages has been on the supply-side and relates to ‘credit’-easing rather than demand-creation.

Abdication and demissioning of rights and welfare have been carried out under the cover of COVID-19 including codification of all Labour Laws (Dewan, 2020). We have also seen reduction of access to Common Property Resources thereby curtailing tribal and forest rights. The enactment of Farm Acts were resisted by what is considered the longest protest in world history (PARI, 2021).

The impacts of a people-insensitive and gender-blind pandemic policy response have long-term generational consequences: reduced potential for increasing employment and employability; intensification of precarity of labour and migration movements; reinforcement of patriarchal divides; widening gender gaps; expansion of poverty; and intensification of economic and extra-economic inequalities. These consequences have to be viewed within the context of three essential processes that have recently gained ascendancy: centralisation of political power; concentration of capital; and the appropriation of the nation’s public assets. All of these are taking place in the midst of



The impacts of a people-insensitive and gender-blind pandemic policy response have long-term generational consequences.

massive shrinking of the democratic space for dissent. India's global rankings today across innumerable indicators related to all SDGs are the lowest in its entire history.

There are several sparks of feminist progressive practices which offer learning experiences for transformative policy, advocacy and action. A few state governments have taken several gender-sensitive measures, Kerala standing out as a best practice. Also, an enormous number of groups, unions, organisations and institutions united to provide support

and also to create a database of the socioeconomic impacts of the pandemic on migrants, employment, wages, nutrition, education, among others. Although these efforts cannot fill the vast vacuum left by an uncaring State, they have led to greater awareness of democratic, constitutional and human rights, in spite of the extensive reduction of democratic freedom and rights of dissent and protest. 🌟

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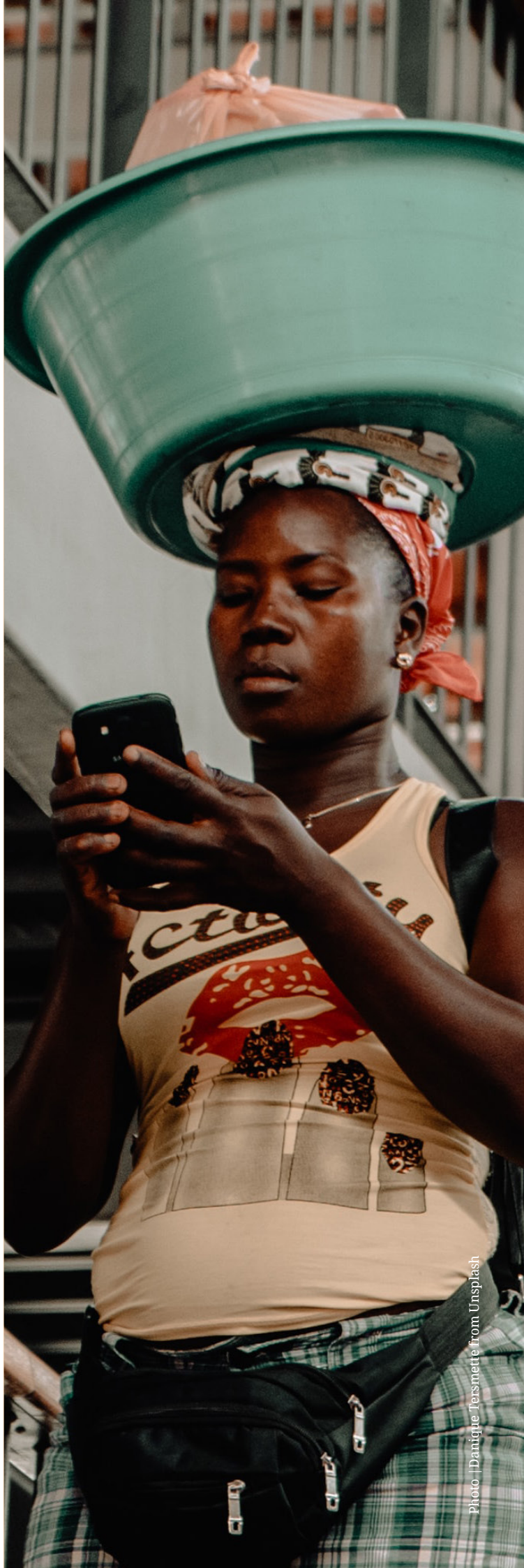
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Ritu Dewan

Prof. Ritu Dewan is the Vice President of the Indian Society of Labour Economics, Visiting Professor at the Institute of Human Development, Trustee of The India Forum, and President of the Indian Association for Women's Studies (2014-17). She was, till her retirement, the first-ever woman Director of the Department of Economics, University of Mumbai, and the founder-member of the first Centre for Gender Economics in Asia.

She has over 150 publications, including 40 books and monographs, encompassing a wide range of issues including Development Economics, Gender Studies & Gender Economics, Rural and Urban Development, Infrastructure, Labour Markets, Environmental Displacement, Peace Studies, etc. She was a member of the Feminist Economists' Group for Engendering the 12th and 11th Five Year Plans as well as of the sub-group on 'Gender and Macro-policies' appointed by the Planning Commission, Government of India. She is also Consultant to UNDP, UN Women, ILO, World Bank, Asian Development Bank, World Wildlife Fund, Action Aid, etc. Her other honorary posts include National Executive member of the Pakistan India People's Forum for Peace and Democracy, Honorary Advisor to the Kashmir Foundation for Peace and Development Studies, and Board of Trustees of the Centre for Budget Governance and Accountability. She is closely associated with training and capacity-building related specially to gender budgeting and gender issues, and has conducted numerous workshops for the Central Government and also several state governments including Jammu & Kashmir, Maharashtra, Goa, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, etc. Her research focus – which interlinks academics, advocacy and action – is the result of issues related to the marginalised, the last two focusing on theoretical- empirical analysis of Paid-UnPaid Work and Demonetisation.

A photograph of a woman in South Africa. She is carrying a large green plastic basin on her head, which has a pink plastic bag tied to it. She is wearing a white tank top with a red and black pattern, a black fanny pack, and a headwrap. She is looking down at a smartphone in her hands. The background shows a metal railing, possibly on a staircase.

**SOCIAL
PROTECTION
THROUGH
FISCAL POLICY
DURING THE
COVID-19
PANDEMIC:
The case of
South Africa**

by Busi Sibeko



fter almost three decades of democracy, South Africa faces multiple crises. The COVID-19 crisis has laid bare the flaws of the current social protection system. The Government has rescinded its Constitutional commitment in ensuring minimum social protection for all.

Prior to the pandemic, South Africa had a well-established social assistance programme. Despite this, the programme did not make provision for those in the non-waged economy, including caregivers; and those of working age who are unemployed – which affects black and coloured women and youth in particular.

As a response to the COVID-19 crisis, the government initially announced a R50 billion (US\$3.4 billion) social security package - equivalent to 10% of the total package - for May to October 2020. This included:

1. A Special COVID-19 Social Relief of Distress (SRD) grant - R350 (US\$23.80) per month;
2. A Caregivers Allowance - R300 (US\$20.40) in May 2020 increasing to R500 (US\$34) per month thereafter; and
3. Increases in all other grants - R250 (US\$17) per month.

The COVID-19 SRD grant was available to unemployed persons with no income, between the ages of eighteen and fifty-nine. The Caregivers' allowance was provided for caregivers who received the Child Support Grant (CSG) on behalf of the children in their care. The measures were much needed and provided a ray of progressivity into how governments can provide social protection through fiscal policy.

The initial exclusion of caregivers from the COVID-19 SRD grant brought to the fore gender bias in the policy design. In the absence of adequate social protection (including social assistance) that takes into account gender, race, geography and other intersectionalities, the crisis of social reproduction is likely to continue.

Geographic access to grants needs to be taken more seriously. The legacy of apartheid spatial planning policies (i.e., the deliberate act of putting marginalised peoples in remote

areas) requires targeted approaches to implementation. For example, research finds that shack dwellers have a low rate of grant collection, considering their poverty level.

Asylum-seekers and special permit holders were also initially excluded from the SRD grant. As civil society group Black Sash (a human rights organisation advocating for social justice) has shown, it was only after litigation by the Scalabrini Center that this vulnerable group was eligible. Even after the court order, the process to put a payment system in place was delayed.

A dogged commitment to fiscal austerity, in part, explains why the social protection measures have been approached in a stop-start manner, with civil society having to continuously advocate and fight for continued and expanded social protection measures. The COVID-19 SRD grant was initially implemented between May 2020 and October 2020 and further extended to April 2021 and was reintroduced from August 2021 to March 2022. The extreme stance of austerity adopted in the 2020 Budget (before the pandemic) should have been abandoned to address the crisis itself.

In the absence of adequate social protection that takes into account gender, race, geography and other intersectionalities, the crisis of social reproduction is likely to continue.

Civil society and the Department of Social Development have argued that the COVID-19 SRD grant could become a pathway toward a Universal Basic Income Grant (UBIG), be a significant policy change. Feminist economists have long argued for non-commodified means of existence that are non-conditional, however, there remains great debate within feminist economists on UBIGs, particularly in the context of financialised capitalism.

The South African case demonstrates that even with parts of government, notably the Department of Social Development, proposing to create innovative policy responses, there

are powerful factions within the government that are committed to the orthodoxy or ‘business as usual’ approach. The National Treasury’s commitment to austerity reinforces DAWN’s analytical framework hypotheses that Governments “may carry on with the same old policies even though there may be an uneasy awareness that more is needed” (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021, p.12). 🍌

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Busi Sibeko

Busi Sibeko is an economist and researcher. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Economics from Duke University and a Masters in the Political Economy of Development from SOAS, University of London. She was previously at the Institute for Economic Justice where her research focus was macroeconomic policy, including participatory feminist budgeting. She was the Co-chair of the Budget Justice Coalition which is comprised of 14+ civil society organisations. She provided research support to the labour constituency. She authored *The Cost Austerity: Lessons for South Africa* and is a co-author of *A fiscal stimulus for South Africa*. In 2020, Busi was featured in the roundtable series of renowned economists on *Rebirthing the Global Economy to Deliver Sustainable Development* by the United Nations Secretary General. She considers herself a feminist political economist in training and is determined to be a part of unwinding structural injustice.

A woman wearing a pink long-sleeved shirt and a blue apron with a circular logo that says "WORLD FEDERATION OF WOMEN'S ASSOCIATIONS" is writing in a notebook. She is also wearing a purple and white patterned headscarf. The background is slightly blurred, showing an outdoor setting. On the right side of the image, there is a vertical credit line: "Photo | Cottonbro from Pexels".

**THE
SOCIOECONOMIC
COST OF COVID-19
AUSTERITY:
The Case of the
School Feeding
Programme in
Ghana**

*By Gertrude Dzifa Torvikey
& Sylvia Ohene Marfo*

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased debates about social reproduction and women's roles in the family and society. The discourses also highlight the need for states to play a more significant role in balancing their priorities, including social reproduction. The family is both a centre of income and consumption and women shoulder vulnerabilities that families suffer. Economic and reproduction crises resulting from the pandemic impose additional responsibility on women to work harder to earn incomes and take care of the household at the same time (Bahn et al., 2020). Division of labour that imposes care work on women is rooted in structural inequality, which disproportionately affects women, and socioeconomic inequalities worsen this. The family unit reflects the inequalities in society, and state interventions that directly or indirectly target the family and children affect women. Consequently, state interventions and programmes are essential to lessen the burden of care and economic fallouts on women, mainly due to their income and food supplementing effects.

In Ghana, the state implements the school feeding programme, which is vital for sharing the care burden with the family. The programme is essential for children in impoverished regions because it provides them sustainable food and nutrition, which they may not get from their families (Aurino et al., 2018). The programme has improved healthy growth in girls, children in the poorest wealth quintile families, and children in the poorest regions

in the country (Gelli et al., 2019). This context provides a lens to understand who is most affected by its discontinuation and now, de-investment.

Our contribution to the Policy Transformations project focused on the closure of schools, the discontinuation of the feeding programme and the continuous austerity in programme implementation within a pandemic context. We conducted in-depth interviews and analyzed primary and secondary sources to illuminate discussion about whether the pandemic has helped transform the programme

The family is both a centre of income and consumption and women shoulder vulnerabilities that families suffer.

progressively. Building on feminist political economy perspectives, the case study incorporates sexual division of labour, social policy, equality, and social equity concepts within an intersectional framework.

We argue that limited policy imagination, structural obstacles such as indebtedness, donor dependency and political interests played a significant role in the policy responses to the pandemic crisis. Likewise, we delve into the coping strategies of the affected households and the gender inequalities arising from the pandemic and proposed recommendations.

Key Findings

Discontinuation of the Ghana School Feeding Programme (GSFP) for the target beneficiaries affected households that depended on it.

Diversion of the school feeding budget dedicated to children and women for other target beneficiaries raised questions about the use of those budgets.

The discontinuation of the programme increased vulnerabilities in female-headed households and households with men who had lost jobs due to COVID-19, thereby increasing the reproductive burden on women and children.

The discontinuation of the GSFP increased child labour as families put children to work to supplement their mothers' income.

The time required for cooking also increased as meals that children previously received in school must now be cooked at home by women and girls.

School reopening came with even greater austerity within programme implementation, which has had ramifications for the nutrition and health of children.

Conclusions

With a large informal economy, and its associated precarity and uncertainties, the least the state could do was take part in childcare through continuous child welfare programmes such as the school feeding programme with health, nutrition, and educational goals. This would have been a way for the state to share the burden of

social reproduction. Such policy response is needed by women who continue to face difficulties sustaining their livelihoods, in conditions of vulnerability and structural inequalities. Rather than intensify its role in childcare through welfare programmes during the pandemic, the state diverted resources for the school feeding programme elsewhere. During the period, the halting of the programme exacerbated the already deepening structural inequalities suffered by women and girls in terms of care burden within families. The pandemic exacerbated the need for the state to properly delineate the function of social reproduction for the economic system and its role in care sharing responsibilities. 🌟

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Gertrude Dzifa Torvikey

Gertrude Dzifa Torvikey is a Research Fellow at the Institute of Statistical, Social and Economic Research (ISSER), University of Ghana. She also works with *Feminist Africa Journal* at the same University. Her research interests are in agrarian livelihoods, migration, labour and gender issues.



Sylvia Ohene Marfo

Sylvia Ohene Marfo is a food studies scholar and holds a PhD in Sociology from the University of Ghana. Her research interest includes but not limited to the Sociology of food and agriculture and Anthropology of food and eating, especially constructing ethnic identity through foodways. She has extensive qualitative research experience in girls' education, gender studies, migrate businesses, food, agriculture and labour.



**TRINIDAD
AND TOBAGO:
Social Protection
and Care Policies
in the time of
COVID-19**

*By Karen A. Roopnarine
& Crystal Brizan*

This contribution to the Policy Transformations project centred on the Government of Trinidad and Tobago’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, it looks into care and social protection policies, one of the primary mechanisms implemented, which reached over 220,000 households. In it we examined whether the COVID-19 social protection and care policies implemented had any transformational effect on social and gender inequalities as well as on macroeconomic policy.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted pre-existing inequalities in Trinidad and Tobago, and these inequalities were more pronounced among various groups of persons who possess fewer resources and are more vulnerable, particularly women, youth, older persons, and persons with disabilities. The pandemic highlighted several economic, social, cultural and health and well-being challenges faced by women in Trinidad and Tobago, not only as poverty levels are higher in female-headed households, but also because the more significant share of unpaid care activities is performed by women, including the new and additional burden of educating children due to the extended closure of schools. The service industry, including tourism, services and sales, and domestic sectors, were negatively impacted by COVID-19 lockdown restrictions in terms of output and loss of employment. Like other jurisdictions, in Trinidad and Tobago these sectors are predominately comprised of informal sector workers, many of whom are women.

The underlying philosophy and objective of the Government’s COVID-19 intervention was one of balancing containment efforts with the need to maintain livelihoods. This was done using a “broad set of policy measures to assist the poor and vulnerable, protect businesses, jobs, and incomes, maintain financial resilience, and sustain economic activity” (GORTT, 2020, p. 6). It immediately established a targeted social safety net to protect the most vulnerable individuals and households (including current beneficiaries of existing cash transfer programmes such as the Food Support Programme, Senior Citizen

Pension, and Disability Assistance Grant), in addition to emergency income support and salary relief grants. Notably, there was no explicit mention of unpaid domestic and care work in the Government's COVID-19 support strategy.

In many ways, the targeted cash transfers (CTs) support programme was a continuation of the pre-COVID-19 approaches. These focused on CTs as opposed to strengthened social security systems for the self-employed as well as enhanced social services to address the causal factors contributing to economic and social inequality, mental health, and other social problems such as addiction, school dropouts, etc. In essence, based on DAWN's analytical framework (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021), the emergency CTs were stagnant and path-dependent with little to no innovative or socially transformative measures instituted.

Many women did not meet the criteria to apply as they had no payments into the national insurance system, having worked as domestic workers or in the informal economy.

A review of the targeted CTs found that more male applications were approved. The Government did not share the reason(s) for the lower approval rate for female applicants. However, Kambon (2021) noted that fewer women applied for Salary Relief Grants. Many women did not meet the criteria to apply as they had no payments into the national insurance system, having worked as domestic workers or in the informal economy. Some women could not apply/receive rental assistance grants as their rental contracts were informal rental agreements, and landlords chose not to comply with the necessary information requirements that formed part of the grant application. Moreover, many women could not navigate or access the online grant application process. COVID-19 brought to the fore how inadequate the official listing of workers registered with the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) was as a tool for identifying vulnerable persons in society. It also brought to light the absence of direct links between communities and the poor and the State's social development and support systems.

Social protection measures applied in response to COVID-19 focused on social assistance, and little to no efforts focused on care services. The COVID-19 pandemic shed light on the deep-seated inequalities of the existing social organisation of care. This inequality is manifested in the distribution of care responsibilities and care labour among families, especially between women and men. During the pandemic, seventy-one per cent of women reported being responsible for coordinating or assisting with home-schooling compared with only twenty-five per cent among men. Moreover, almost sixty per cent of women were responsible for cooking and cleaning compared with less than thirty-two per cent of men having to be responsible for these domestic chores (IDB, 2020). Unpaid care labour has been a critical way that the country has absorbed the pandemic shock, acting as a countercyclical buffer. Social distance measures and lockdowns have been made possible by the availability of unpaid care work in households and communities (Rodríguez Enríquez, 2020). School closures and distance learning, and increased reliance on at-home health care and cleaning, among others, have amplified the country's dependence on unpaid care labour, especially overloading women and girls and possibly pushing women out of the labour market. Post-COVID-19, there is a significant risk that the expulsion of women workers from the labour market becomes further normalised. There is also the risk that the amplified reliance on women's unpaid care labour becomes directly or indirectly a policy measure by which publicly provided care services continue to be weakened and their costs externalised (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021).

Although Trinidad and Tobago has already established some social protection floors, the Government should focus on closing the remaining gaps and changing its policy approach, especially for women. For example, the national insurance scheme should expand its coverage to cover self-employed persons such as entrepreneurs, and domestic paid and unpaid workers, a sizable portion of whom are women. Moreover, a paradigm shift needs to occur in the way in which the Government delivers social services, addressing the underlying causes of social and gender-based inequalities. The management of social protection and care programmes has to become more efficient and effective, thereby better reaching citizens who are most in need. Moreover, the overarching aim of social protection and care programmes should be to address the underlying social challenges that negatively affect peoples' lives and affect their ability to be fully participating citizens in society. Failure to make the necessary transformational changes in the delivery of the country's social services will undermine Trinidad and Tobago's long term socio-economic goals, including that of gender equality. ▲

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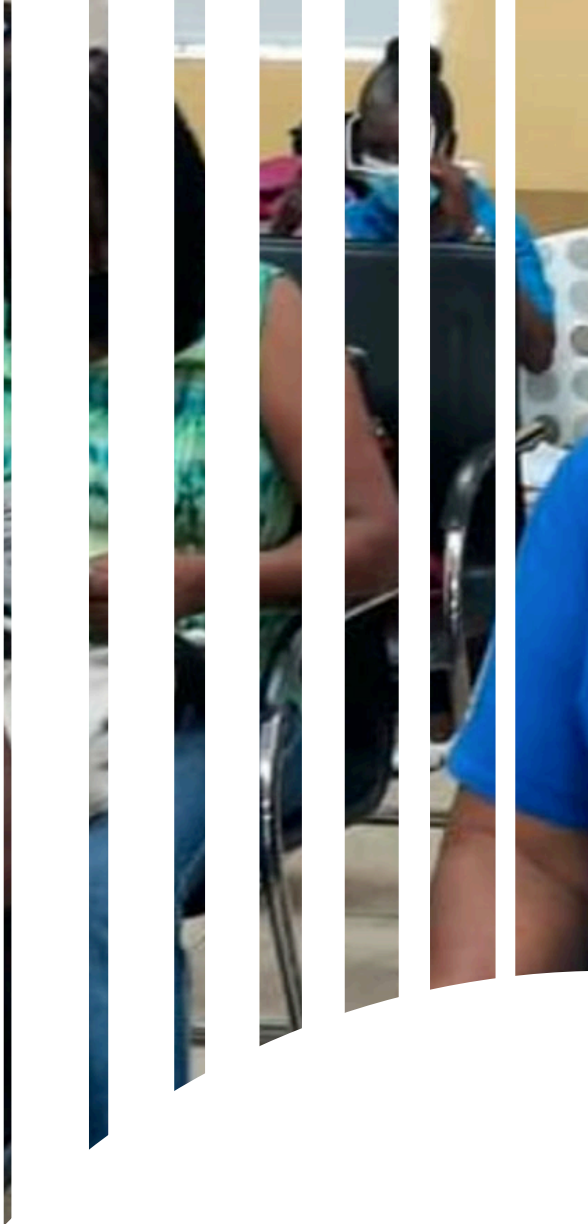
Dr Karen A. Roopnarine

Dr Karen A. Roopnarine is a Trinidad and Tobago national who graduated in 2018 from the University of Nottingham with a PhD in Economics. She was the top-performing student in her undergraduate year at The University of the West Indies (UWI), St Augustine Campus, leading to a First-Class Honours degree in Economics and Finance. After graduating with her MSc in Economics, she joined The Central Bank of Trinidad and Tobago as an Economist, where she is presently employed.



Crystal Brizan

Crystal Brizan is an Attorney-at-Law with over 14 years of experience in the practice of Law, particularly in Occupational safety and health, Industrial Relations, Legal Research and Legislative Drafting and Review. She also holds a Masters in Gender and Development Studies and has conducted research and managed projects on cross-cutting themes such as Human Rights, Gender Justice and Health. Ms. Brizan strongly believes that Civil Society plays an important role in fostering gender equity and in this regard, has worked with and is a member of several non-governmental organisations; she is the current National Representative of the Caribbean Association for Feminist Research and Action.



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COVID-19, LABOUR POLICY AND DOMESTIC WORKERS' RIGHTS IN JAMAICA

by Ayesha Constable

The COVID-19 pandemic has had devastating impacts across the globe. Since its emergence, COVID-19 has had a range of cascading effects on global health and the economy with varying extremes based on pre-existing conditions (Bowleg, 2020; UN Women, ILO and ECLAC; (2020). The impacts of COVID-19 at the country level have been a function of the existing levels of (in)equality, legislative frameworks and governance systems. Countries with stronger economies and leadership have generally fared better than those at the other end of the spectrum. Jamaica like many other countries, has been severely impacted by the pandemic with significant losses to economic sectors such as tourism. Informal sector workers in vulnerable groups were among the hardest hit by the absence of safety nets and social protection systems to cushion the effects (CAPRI, 2021). In the Jamaican context, Domestic Workers (DWs) were among the workers that faced the most crippling socio-economic effects (IDWFED, 2020).

This research used a qualitative approach including desktop research, semi-structured interviews, and a survey. The extensive desktop review included reputable newspapers and media reports, and key fiscal and social policies policy documents. Five semi-structured interviews were conducted with DWs via telephone to discuss their work experiences before and during COVID-19. Additionally, an online survey was administered to employers of DWs to which twelve individuals responded. The analysis of the findings was done using an intersectional framework to highlight the complex nature of the national structural arrangements and their impact at the individual level.

Historically, colonial forces have shaped contemporary Jamaican society and set the stage for the ways in which COVID-19 affected macro-economics and labour rights in the country (French, 1988; Heron, 2008; Soares, 2009). Jamaica's rigid class structure is itself a remnant of the country's colonial past, which is fuelled and sustained by disparities in income, educational attainment, and access to power (Heron, 2008). The position and perceptions of women in society are shaped by similar and interrelated forces.

Despite gains made by women, particularly in higher education, prevailing attitudes and structural barriers create obstacles to women's access to some spaces of power and lead

to the disparity of views on the economic value of women's work (Tindigarukayo, 1996). Women such as DWs are perceived as being at the lowest levels of the labour hierarchy. These negative perceptions are reinforced by the absence of laws and state policies to protect and safeguard their welfare. Instead, domestic workers' interests are largely the mandate of the Jamaica Household Workers' Union which serves as an advocacy group on behalf of this group of workers (Soares, 2009; IDWFED, 2020).

Domestic work in Jamaica is characterised by low wages, informal work arrangements, long hours of work and limited institutional support (Walker, 2003). It is an occupation that, as is globally, constituted primarily of women from lower socioeconomic classes, with low levels of educational attainment and women who have limited access to power due to the economic and class structure of the country. COVID-19 exposed and aggravated the social and economic precarities of DWs in Jamaica and led to job losses, reduced incomes, increased workloads and heightened psychological issues among the women in that occupational group (IDWFED, 2020).

Government policy measures were varied and cut across different sectors and thematic areas (KPMG, 2020). In response, the government of Jamaica implemented fiscal measures, financial relief interventions, closed all academic institutions, implemented work from home policies, curfews and restrictions on movement and vaccination measures (IMF, 2021). None of these measures specifically targeted or considered the complex realities of DWs and as a result, exacerbated their impacts on them. DWs were unable to access economic relief packages under the care program. Their workload was increased due to the need to home-school children as a result of school closures, curfews and lockdowns which barred them from getting to and from work, resulting in job losses or reduced hours of work. Even where measures were created to benefit DWs, social and economic limitations constituted barriers to access, as seen with the economic stimulus package put in place by the government. DWs are not protected by existing labour laws.

They are not registered in the National Insurance Scheme (NIS) because they lack of formal labour arrangements with their employers. The lack of protections meant that they were unable to access these benefits confirmed the need for policy interventions tailored to DWs and for the urgent need to formalise domestic work. The Jamaica Household Workers Union (JHWU) sought to ameliorate the impacts of the pandemic on domestic workers through short term relief measures.

There is need for legislative and institutional changes, as well as to public education. The current legal frameworks do not adequately support DWs by enforcing guidelines

The pandemic has served as a catalyst for change and, in the short term, has highlighted the need to address the situation of DWs.

related to salaries, hours and termination. Current labour laws must be revised to address these gaps. Alternatively, specific legislation for DWs must be developed to safeguard the welfare of this group of workers. Additionally, domestic work needs to be formalised as a priority for the workers themselves and also to ensure more structured working arrangements. Negative perceptions and attitudes towards women and domestic work in the wider society pose a challenge to successfully addressing the infringements on domestic workers' rights and the general treatment of DWs.

Other findings of this study showed that alternative livelihood options such as agriculture and opportunities for migration which may be considered by DWs are also at risk.

Agriculture currently faces multiple risks related to climate change. As such, suggestions made by the DWs that they will expand their agricultural operations to generate income need to be gauged against the projections for rising temperatures and droughts resulting from climate change. Similarly, migration prospects may be deemed as a survival tool where immigration policies are demanding vaccination of all persons entering their borders.

The immediate impacts of COVID-19 have worsened the situation for DWs in Jamaica in the short term. Moreover, impacts have been exacerbated by the interrelated economic, political and social issues that shape their realities. The pandemic has also exposed the level of vulnerability of DWs to economic shocks.

To this end, the pandemic has served as a catalyst for change and, in the short term, has highlighted the need to address the situation of DWs, recognise their labour rights and include them in social protection systems. It has also shown the importance of adopting an intersectional approach to create a more inclusive and democratic policy responses in the context of structural crises. 🌟



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Ayesha Constable

Ayesha has paired her activism with her scholarship having researched and published on gender and climate change as part of her doctoral studies, which links her interests in agriculture and climate adaptation. She has researched extensively on youth and gender within the context of climate justice, contributing to global and regional policy and academic discourse on climate change. Her recent academic research has examined feminist activism with the application of an intersectional lens to examine the role of young women and girls in climate action in the Caribbean. She is founder of the Young People for Action on Climate Change Jamaica (YPACCJa), which is leading a movement lead approach to the building of a Climate Justice Youth Coalition in the Caribbean; and founded GirlsCARE- Girls for Climate Action for Resilience and Empowerment which offers mentorship for girls in climate activism.



**CONDITIONAL
CASH TRANSFER
PROGRAMMES
IN THE COVID-19
CRISIS IN THE
PLURINATIONAL
STATE OF BOLIVIA**

by Silvia Fernández Cervantes

The multidimensional crisis of COVID-19 has brought to the forefront of discussion, for those who wish to acknowledge it, the existence of the structural and irresolvable conflict between “life and capital”, which is increasingly exacerbated and deepened by extractivist neoliberalism.

Today, more than ever, we are facing an attack on life and the means that make life possible, forcing us to think and analyse, beyond the narrative of “development”, the very nature of the capitalist system in its relation to patriarchal order and culture.

The Plurinational State of Bolivia is made up of thirty-six native indigenous nations, a large sector that defines itself as mestizo and a part that recognises itself as “white”. With more than twenty indigenous languages, the predominant language is Spanish. It is a diverse society in terms of origin and outlook, but with the same capitalist and patriarchal colonial structure of subordination and discrimination (racial, class and gender). The colonial heritage persists, with an economic model based on extractivism, dependent on international prices for hydrocarbons, minerals, and other commodities.

↑ The condition of coloniality, now enhanced, is entrenched by new forms of extractivism; dispossession and privatisation of land; profound and violent commodification of nature; and discrimination, oppression and violence against women. Forms of capitalist accumulation inherited from the colonial period, which passed through the republic, arrive in the Plurinational State under the discourse of the “right to development” that legitimises the irrational exploitation of nature. Plurinationality ends up being a symbol of political power and a mirage of equality.

To refer to the continuity of the relations of domination inherited from the colony is to acknowledge the racialised conformation of class division in Bolivian society: the starting assertion that reveals that social relations of domination and exploitation, reinforced by contemporary capitalism, are the way of organising the relations of interdependence that shape social life; always in conditions of classification and inequality, of scarcity, precariousness and conflict. Over 500 years since colonisation, the presence of this order of domination could not have been possible without the powerful relationship between colonisation and globalisation.

As part of the Policy Transformations project, the case study of the Plurinational State of Bolivia focused on part of the social protection policies in the context of the pandemic. The

ruling class and governments have faced the first year of the COVID-19 crisis with pro-cyclical fiscal measures in which tax relief and “emergency” Conditional Cash Transfer Programmes (CTPs) play a key role in reducing the sharp drop in domestic demand. The implementation of the four COVID-19 emergency CTPs shows that the population belonging to the middle and high-income strata has benefited most from the CTPs due to typical economic behaviour, i.e. racialised class stratification and gender inequality. This mercantilist macroeconomic bias, unfavourable to the poorest sectors and to women, deepens the income gap whilst favouring income concentration in the middle and upper-income strata.

By not considering the data on poverty differentiated by geographic area and gender, CTPs have presented an implicit classist and racist bias

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The criterion of “universality” in the coverage of the vouchers does not serve to reach the entire population; it serves to standardise and homogenise different situations, and to treat different social subjects as if they all had the same condition and the same need. This is just one of the weaknesses of the COVID-19 vouchers. It indicates the presence of a macroeconomic and mercantilist bias, because the conditionalities of the CTPs are generic, which means that it does not matter who and how it benefits or what effects it has on the different population sectors.



For example, the family that owns a cigarette factory received the same amount of the Family Voucher as the woman who sells cigarettes on the street for ten or twelve hours and without social protection. This represents about 100 per cent of the monthly income for poor families with an average of 3 children per family who have received a total of 215.20 USD. At the same time, for the high-income stratum, this amount represents up to 8 per cent of their monthly income. Inequality in income distribution is legitimised by the criterion of “universality”.

By not considering the data on poverty differentiated by geographic area and gender, CTPs have presented an implicit classist and racist bias because the different situations of poverty and inequality of urban and rural populations are not considered. What seems to be prioritised, however, is injecting large amounts of money into the market and boosting aggregate demand, which, together with tax exemptions and the transfer of resources to the financial system, protect the reproduction of capital. This orientation towards the reproduction of capital is only possible because the unpaid social reproduction work carried out by women has not ceased for a minute in the COVID-19 crisis. 🌟

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Silvia Fernández Cervantes

Silvia Fernández Cervantes. Feminist activist. Social Worker, Master in Sustainable Development. Specialised in public budgets with gender equality. Founder of the Colectivo Cabildeo, with whom she developed the methodology for the orientation and measurement of public spending on gender equality. She has published several national and international research papers on fiscal policy and gender equality. University lecturer at undergraduate and postgraduate level. International consultant for UN Women and other cooperation agencies.



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

by Zhihong Sa

China is at a stage of rapid population ageing, low fertility, and reduced family size. The shift of care responsibility to the family in the reform era, the high labour force participation of women and rapid income rise has created an increasing demand for domestic services. China is home to twenty-two million domestic workers (ILO, 2021), among which eighty per cent are female rural-to-urban migrants and local farmers (Wang and Wu, 2016; Sa et al., 2020).

Working on the frontline of the COVID-19 crisis, domestic workers worldwide are hardest hit by the pandemic (ILO 2021). China's domestic workers are no exception. While they play an increasingly important role in fulfilling the care needs of urban families, their rights and interests as care labourers are largely neglected under China's social contexts. As part of the Policy Transformations project, this case study investigates the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on domestic workers' work and livelihood and related policy responses in China. Starting from a feminist intersectional lens, I examined the hypotheses proposed by DAWN's Political Transformation analytical framework (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021) by paying close attention to the intertwining effects of gender, class, and institutional barriers on the multiple precarities that domestic workers face before and during the pandemic. I conducted this study through literature review together with in-depth interviews with domestic workers and people in charge of the private placement agencies and social organisations.



The study indicated that domestic workers' pre-pandemic work and employment conditions were shaped by the intertwining effects of gender, class, inequitable labour and migration policies. The vulnerability of domestic workers' pre-pandemic conditions is closely related to the inadequacy of state policies and regulations in the first place. The main focus of state's 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 there is no regulation and supervision of family employers. 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 labour market and have limited access to urban social security systems. Due to the state's control of the trade union and domestic workers' informal employment,

The vulnerability of domestic workers' pre-pandemic conditions is closely related to the inadequacy of state policies and regulations in the first place.

there is a lack of social dialogue for the labour rights of domestic workers. As a result, domestic workers generally have insecure jobs, relatively low pay, extended working times and low levels of social protection (Wang and Wu, 2016; Sa et al., 2020).

Added precarities

Data from in-depth interviews revealed that the COVID-19 pandemic added additional precarities to domestic workers' short-term and long-term economic livelihood, working conditions and psychological well-being. 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 pandemic has worsened live-in

workers' working conditions and psychological well-being, even after the peak restrictive period had ended.

Whilst the study lends support to the hypothesis that state policies related to care and social protection of domestic workers during the pandemic has remained stagnant and path-dependent, recent labour and demographic changes may create opportunities for transformative policy responses to improve the labour and social protection of domestic workers in China.

Three key policy recommendations stemmed from this research. First, the government should give equal weight to production and reproduction by placing gender at the centre of care policy-making process and making greater commitments to the labour and social protection of domestic workers. Second, it is essential to formulate special laws or regulations to protect the labour rights and interests of domestic workers and to regulate the behaviour of family employers. Finally, activism led by women's groups needs to play a more active role in policy and social advocacy for the promotion of domestic workers' labour rights and the change of social norms devaluing care work which is mainly performed by women. 🌟

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Zhihong Sa

Zhihong Sa is an associate professor in the School of Sociology at the Beijing Normal University. She received her PhD in sociology from the University of Maryland at College Park. Her primary research interest deals with social determinants of health and gender with a focus on older adults, rural-urban migrants and adolescents. Her recent work includes domestic workers in China. She has published articles in Journal of Chinese Women's Studies, Sex Roles, BMC Geriatrics, and Journal of Biosocial Science.



**ORGANISING
MIGRANT
DOMESTIC
WORKERS:
Prospects and
Challenges in times
of COVID-19 Crisis
in Malaysia**

by Liva Shreedharan



Migrant domestic workers (MDWs) in Malaysia experience significant work deficits. Their labour conditions include high levels of informality, low wages, limitations in effectively organising and bargaining collectively, exposure to risks of violence and harassment, and exclusions from full labour law and social protection afforded to workers in other sectors. These exclusions engender power imbalances between employers and MDWs. Existing inequalities that MDWs are exposed to have been further exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This case study of the Policy Transformations project examined how MDWs in Malaysia responded to the COVID-19 pandemic. It factored in the multiple oppressions embedded within class, gender, migration status and racial hierarchies that shape MDWs' precarity and are in turn, embedded in Malaysia's pandemic response. The study looks at how Malaysia's political-social context characterised by anti-migrant regimes contribute to (re) producing this precarity during the public health crisis. The case study also examines how MDWs have resisted the COVID-19 crisis amidst the ongoing authoritarian trend through organising and advocacy for progressive policy transformations.

Migrant domestic workers, often in informal and precarious employment, were among the hardest hit by the negative consequences of the public health crisis. Migrant domestic workers experienced extended working hours, inability to access days off, and exposure to risks of violence and of contracting the virus from employers and their family members. Live-out MDWs saw a decrease in working hours and correspondingly lower wages. These negatively impacted their food and income security and their ability to remit money to families in countries of origin (Lim, 2020). Additionally, migrant workers and MDWs were exposed to additional risks of violence due to a direct result of their precarious migration status. The pandemic brought to the fore anti-migrant sentiments as MDWs reported being discriminated against and stigmatised as virus spreaders (Hector and Pereira, 2020; Fishbein, 2020). Similar anti-migrant attitudes manifested itself in the government's pandemic-response policies including in large-scale arrests of undocumented migrants (Human Rights Watch, 2021 and The Straits Times, 2020) and deportations, (Reuters, 2021); increased enforcement of immigration laws, exclusion of migrant workers from pandemic-assistance plans; as well as the prohibition of rental of low-cost housing to migrant workers (Hisamudin, 2020).

MDWs in Malaysia have displayed tremendous resilience and increased the capacity to mobilise and organise themselves, coordinate and come together to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic.

A progressive expansion of authoritarian ambitions of the State was noticeable as the crisis evolved. The Government declared a state of Emergency on the pretext that it needed “to have certain powers to ensure that this pandemic can be curbed effectively” (Prime Minister’s Office, 2021). The Emergency (Essential Power) Ordinance 2021 (EO) increased the powers of security personnel while suspending accountability mechanisms. The State continued to increase the deployment of security personnel to implement large-scale arrests and detention, built up the capacity of prisons and detention centres (Chung, 2021) and suppressed dissent towards this policy (Al Jazeera, 2020). Public assistance was also sought by the Immigration Department to identify and report undocumented migrants via several immigration hotline numbers and through the Immigration Department’s official Facebook page. At the same time, Government took steps to silence civil society criticisms against anti-migrant and pandemic-management policies (Lakhtir, 2020). Immigration raids were conducted in parallel with the implementation of the Labour Recalibration Programme and the Return Recalibration Programme to regularise or repatriate undocumented migrants.

Although these measures reflect the increased biopolitical control on the part of the State and the expansion of an ongoing authoritarian trend, the COVID-19 pandemic has also led to policies that are transformative and progressive for MDWs. The crisis itself has acted as a portal into labour policies that expanded social justice for MDWs. Notably, against the authoritarian landscape, MDWs in Malaysia have displayed tremendous resilience and increased the capacity to mobilise and organise themselves, coordinate and come together to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Migrant domestic workers began organising and conducting these meetings virtually. This altered not only the medium for connecting among MDWs but redefined what the shared public sphere is for seeking to collectively organise. Organising has led to the strengthening of existing MDW associations and the formation of a new one, which created a support network for MDWs to navigate everyday vulnerabilities to rights violations and those that arise from the pandemic, and to raise

awareness of MDWs rights as well as enlarging spaces to claim their rights through policy advocacy. Organising has also led to substantive policy change, specifically the expansion of the coverage of a national social protection scheme to include MDWs. 🌟

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Liva Shreedharan

Liva Sreedharan is a specialist in labour rights in the South and Southeast Asia region. For more than 10 years, Liva has worked to galvanise migrant communities, civil society organisations and governments to collaborate on enhancing protection of victims of human trafficking through legal advocacy, capacity building and community outreach projects. Liva was instrumental in lobbying lawmakers for the passing of the Anti-Trafficking in Persons Act 2007 and drafted the Domestic Workers Bill for adoption as national legislation in Malaysia. Her most recent projects include promoting the digitisation of case management systems used by migrant rights organisations.



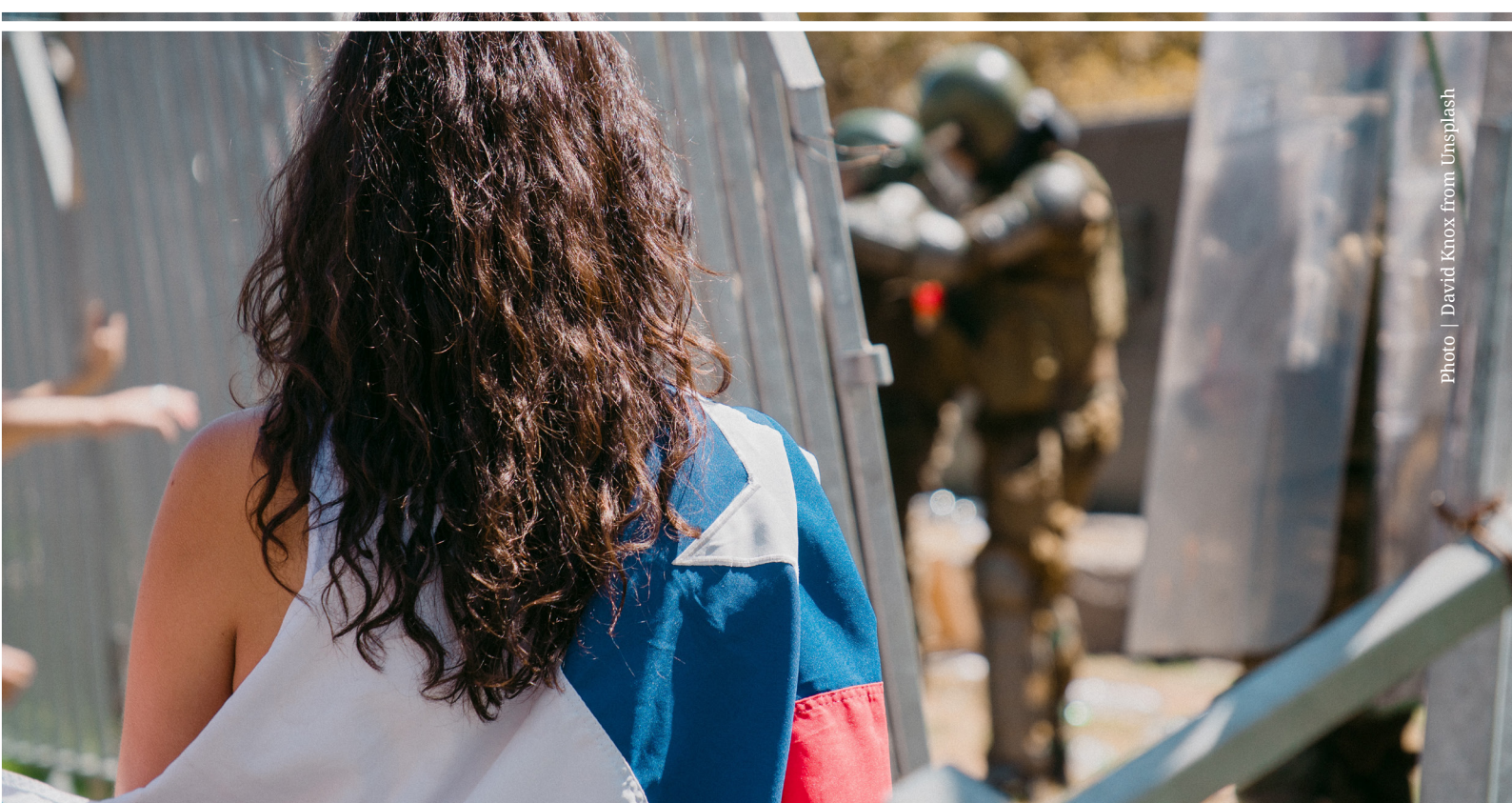
COLLECTIVE CARE TO CONFRONT THE PANDEMIC AND THE CRIMINALISATION OF MIGRATION IN CHILE

*Nanette Liberona, Carolina Stefoni
& Sius Salinas*



The Chilean case for the Policy Transformation project analyses how the COVID-19 pandemic favoured the increase of entry restrictions and biopolitical control of international migration. The effects of these measures have been resisted and addressed mainly by civil society organisations, with the significant participation of migrant women.

The repressive response to the 2019 social outburst in Chile and the implementation of new restrictions as a result of the pandemic, contributed to normalising state military and police control over the population. Moreover, the closing of borders as a measure to “stop” the pandemic strengthened the policies restricting the entry of migrants. As such, the parliamentary debate on the Migration Law during 2018 and 2021 took place in an environment of increasing criminalisation of migration. This scenario was compounded by an increase in racist and xenophobic discourse, limitations on access to social assistance during the pandemic and a series of administrative difficulties that slowed down the regularisation process. This largely accounted for the development of resistance and solidarity practices led by women.



Our contribution is the result of previous research conducted and an update of the ethnographic work carried out in Iquique and Santiago de Chile within the framework of DAWN's project (2021). This update was carried out in collaboration with migrant organisations, through joint actions that made their issues visible, such as the drafting and dissemination of statements. We also conducted interviews in the cities of Iquique and Santiago with migrant women and activists of Peruvian, Bolivian, Venezuelan and Ecuadorian nationality. In addition, we conducted a systematic review of the press from March 2020 to May 2021, focusing on migration policy, undocumented movements, expulsions and the reactions of authorities and citizens to migration. The ethnographic work was carried out between May and July 2021.

In order to address the hypothesis that the migration policies implemented in the context of the pandemic increased biopolitical control, we analyse the national context based on three elements. Firstly, the social outburst that occurred in October 2019 in Chile. This national mobilisation is relevant because it instilled control and the loss of civil liberties, while transforming the social and political scenario of the country to the point of opening a constituent process that should reflect, among other things, on the place of migration in nation-building.

Women - in their historical role as caregivers - have been protagonists of collective solidarity actions that unfolded during the pandemic.

Secondly, we analyse the new migration law passed in 2021 and its implications for the migrant population. We also addressed the measures that have been implemented towards the migrant population during the last stage of Sebastián Piñera's government (2018-2022) and the consequences this has had on the migration regularisation process. The final element was the effects that the pandemic has had on the migrant population, especially since the closure of the borders as a result of the health emergency. This is an extremely complex situation, as poverty has increased even more among migrants.

The pandemic and the measures adopted towards the migrant population had different effects on the way in which the violations and violence experienced by migrant women and their families, residents or in transit in Santiago and Iquique, were articulated. Among other measures, we analysed the extraordinary regularization process of 2021. The results of this study point to a series of difficulties that Venezuelans and Haitians faced, regardless of gender, due to the innumerable problems in obtaining the certificate of criminal records; difficulties in carrying out the procedures online, including online payments, problems in the regularisation platform; and the absence of consulates in certain cities. In the case of women, the lack of time and the lack of someone to leave their children with to comply, represent added difficulties.

Against this background, the case study analyses the practices deployed by migrant women to cope in the context of acute impoverishment due to COVID. Women - in their historical role as caregivers - have been protagonists of collective solidarity actions that unfolded during the pandemic. Through their participation and actions in public spaces, migrant leaders have made it possible to safeguard the lives of their own families and many others who have been made more vulnerable during the pandemic. 🟡

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Nanette Paz Liberona

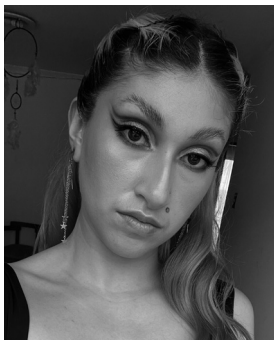
Nanette Paz Liberona Concha has a degree in Ethnology from the University Paris 8 and a PhD in Anthropology and Sociology from the University Paris 7. She is an academic at the Department of Anthropology at the University of Tarapacá and at the PhD in Social Sciences in the same university. She is currently researcher in charge of the regular Fondecyt project: “Refugio en Chile y densidad del tránsito. Production of corporealities and impact on the health of bodies in mobility”. Her research interests are immigration, borders, racism, corporeality, migrants’ health and irregular cross-border transit. She is the author of several indexed scientific articles and co-author of three books: *Letras en movimiento. Recopilación de escritos migrantes en Tarapacá*, together with Roberto Bustamante, result of the 2015 Book Fund of the Council for Culture and the Arts, published by Cinosargo publishing house; and *El afán de cruzar las fronteras; Enfoques transdisciplinarios sobre migraciones y movilidad en Sudamérica y Chile*, co-edited with Dr. Marcela Tapia Ladino, and *Violencia en la toma. Segregación residencial, injusticia ambiental y abandono de pobladores inmigrantes en La Pampa, Alto Hospicio*, co-edited with Dr. Carlos Piñones Rivera and published by Ril editores in 2020.



Carolina Stefoni

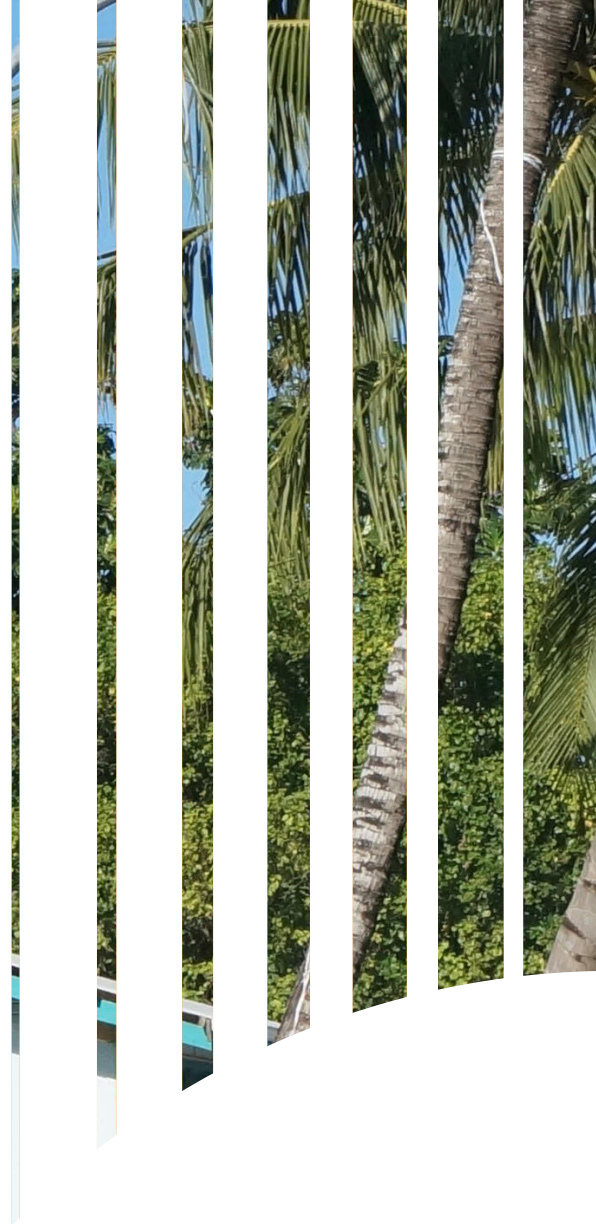
Sociologist from Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Director of the Doctorate in Social Sciences at the Universidad de Tarapacá. Master in Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham and PhD in Sociology at Universidad Alberto Hurtado. Full Professor at Universidad de Tarapacá, associate researcher at the Centre for Social Conflict and Cohesion Studies (COES). Consultant of international organizations in the area of migrations for ECLAC / CELADE; ILO, IOM, UNESCO and UNHCR.

She has published in national and international academic journals, books and book chapters on migration studies. Her main research topics are migration policy, intercultural education, labor and gender migration. She currently coordinates the project “Routes and trajectories of Venezuelan migrants in South America. When borders are closed”.



Sius-geng Salinas

Sius-geng Salinas Pérez, Psychologist and master’s in international Relations and Cross-Border Studies, she is currently a PhD student in Social Sciences at the Universidad de Tarapacá. She has worked on several research projects as an assistant, developing her own interest in migration and gender, studying gender violence in migrant smuggling and irregular migration of women by analysing it from the perspective of social reproduction.



PACIFIC LABOUR MOBILITY SCHEMES IN THE COVID-19 CONTEXT: The case of Kiribati

by Roi Burnett

With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, hundreds of I-Kiribati seasonal workers were left stranded in Australia and New Zealand and were unable to return home. Whilst showing resilience and perseverance during this time, the experiences of I-Kiribati seasonal workers has magnified the long-standing social costs and gendered implications of Pacific Labour Mobility (PLM) schemes.

The Recognised Seasonal Employer Scheme (RSE) in New Zealand, and the Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) and Pacific Labour Scheme (PLS) in Australia are often applauded for representing international best practices for labour mobility schemes, owing to the ‘triple-wins’ accrued to all involved. Pacific countries, like Kiribati, address social and economic development concerns through remittances sent home. Receiving countries fill critical labour shortages within their agriculture and horticulture industries, whilst the workers themselves earn a higher income than they would have been able to in their home countries.

The pervasive ‘triple-win’ rhetoric masks the inherent power imbalances within PLM schemes, as well as other pressing social and gendered implications of seasonal work

However, this pervasive ‘triple-win’ rhetoric masks the inherent power imbalances within PLM schemes, as well as other pressing social and gendered implications of seasonal work. Whilst these schemes are highly regulated, stringent visa conditions contribute to the precarity of workers by being tied to one employer; unable to bring their family for the term of their visa; strict rules around movement and working hours; and working hours

subject to seasonal variability. A lack of gendered considerations within the design of these schemes has also been a challenge, resulting in very few numbers of female workers. These characteristics have resulted in numerous allegations of worker exploitation over the years.

With the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic, international border closures, as well as city or state-wide lockdowns, saw hundreds of I-Kiribati seasonal workers stranded in Australia and New Zealand. During this time, I-Kiribati seasonal workers were the most affected in comparison to other Pacific seasonal workers, experiencing larger cuts in working hours and wages. Unable to access any public welfare support, employers, NGO groups and Kiribati diaspora community groups have provided invaluable support to I-Kiribati workers during this time.

Whilst New Zealand's and Australia's government responses have addressed immediate concerns around the legality of stay through continuous visa extensions, overall, policy responses have focused on serving the needs of the destination countries at the expense of seasonal workers. In Australia, this was seen with a restart of the SWP programme only a few months after the start of the pandemic, well before a vaccine was made available and international borders reopened. Major reforms in Australia saw the existing SWP and PLS streamlined into the Pacific Australian Labour Mobility (PALM) scheme. The key emphasis of this reform was to make it easier for employers to access workers.

This new agricultural visa has sparked fears that opportunities for Pacific workers would be reduced whilst creating conditions for further worker exploitation.

Furthermore, of concern to many, the Australian Government introduced a new, less regulated agriculture visa for ASEAN countries. This new agricultural visa has sparked fears that opportunities for Pacific workers would be reduced whilst creating conditions for further worker exploitation.



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Author: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DAFT), Australia.*

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Despite the efforts to reopen and expand the PLM schemes, the situation for workers has largely remained the same, if not worse. Reports of poor employment practices are still occurring in Australian and New Zealand industries. This has been further heightened by figures suggesting 1,181 seasonal workers in Australia ‘absconded’ in 2021, substantially up from the 225 recorded the year before. Rather than addressing the characteristics of the PLM scheme that cause workers to abscond, the Australian Government has launched a campaign that places the blame of absconding on the workers themselves, as seen in several media outlets.

In the context of New Zealand, the experiences of six I-Kiribati pregnant women have revealed some of the long- ignored gendered aspects of seasonal work. These women, along with forty-seven other I-Kiribati women, have been stranded in New Zealand for over eighteen months at the time of writing. The experiences of these pregnant women, who have now all given birth in New Zealand, has been challenging. In normal circumstances, women who become pregnant whilst working on these schemes would be supported to return home to give birth. However, with COVID-19 this has not been possible. RSE medical insurance does not cover pregnancy and childbirth costs. As such, employers and diaspora Kiribati community members have covered these costs as well as, in some, cases housing the women and their babies.

Whilst the pandemic has been framed as being a portal to a new normality (Roy, 2020), relying on the hypotheses proposed by DAWN’s analytical framework (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021) this paper argues that responses in the aftermath of COVID-19 indicate that PLM policy remains ‘business as usual’ as they did not deliver substantial changes in terms of improvement of the worker’s migrant status, labour rights and the gendered aspects of seasonal work. However, despite this, the pandemic has highlighted some positive aspects that could inform policy responses in future. The support that diaspora groups have continued to provide seasonal workers throughout the pandemic has been invaluable. This has provided opportunities to rethink support for the welfare of I-Kiribati and other Pacific seasonal workers, with diaspora Pacific communities potentially playing a more transformative role looking forward. 🌟

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Roi Burnett

Roi Burnett is of I-Kiribati and European descent. She is passionate about development and gender in the Pacific region. After completing a BA (Hons) in Geography and Politics at the University of Otago, Roi spent two years volunteering with local NGO’s in Tarawa, Kiribati. Influenced by her time volunteering she is now completing a Master’s of Pacific Studies at the University of Auckland, looking at narratives of gender equality, culture and colonization in Kiribati. She is a strong advocate for centring indigenous Pacific women voices in development.



**SOCIAL POLICIES
IN TIMES OF
COVID-19 IN
BARBADOS:
Analysis of the
'Adopt Our Families'
Programme and
the Increase of
Minimum Wage**

*Dr Daniele Bobb
& Leigh-Ann Worrell*



In 2018, Barbados entered an International Monetary Fund (IMF) program, operating under the framework of The Barbados Economic Recovery and Transformation (BERT) Plan, which falls under the Extended Fund Facility of the IMF. In previous IMF Programmes, structural adjustment programmes reinforced and drew on the unequal relations of power, leaving women solely responsible for their families (Antrobus, 2004; Barriteau, 1994). The COVID-19 pandemic presented a unique opportunity for Barbados to implement transformational and progressive policies. Our contribution to the Policy Transformations project addresses the central question: what provisions did the government make in social programs between the initial IMF negotiations and the pandemic? This question is central in determining whether or not Barbados grasped the opportunity provided by the COVID-19 pandemic to implement transformational and progressive policies. We paid particular attention to Barbados' debt restructuring process since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. The case study delves into two key policy responses in a COVID environment: the Adopt Our Families Programme and the decision to increase the minimum wage.

The cost of living in Barbados remains the highest in the Eastern Caribbean at an index of 80.32 (Numbeo, 2019). In Barbados, only certain categories of workers (shop assistants, domestics, agricultural workers) have been covered by minimum wage legislation over the years (Downes, 2008). Barbados' new minimum wage (USD 4.25 per hour) took effect on 1 April 2021 and included other categories of workers. The Adopt Our Families programme began in April 2020 as a way to support families that were hardest hit by the pandemic, and formed part of an ecosystem of social care policies meant to care for the most vulnerable. These policies represent an interesting case in how the Government attempted to provide a social safety net for working-class citizens. The study adopts an intersectional feminist lens to capture the multiple relations of power at the macro and micro levels.

A gender analysis would help produce more targeted and effective social justice policy responses

This, therefore, allows us to expose and account for the multiple imbrications of class, gender, family, and economics, and demonstrate how particular ideologies about these markers are institutionalised into systems and policies. In particular, we assessed the impacts on care systems and livelihoods of Barbados' policy changes during the pandemic.

There were three main findings to our study. Firstly, the study demonstrated that gender was not positioned as pivotal in the development of the policy/programme and thus issues such as reach, effectiveness,

↑ efficiency, and access emerged. Going forward, a gender analysis would help produce more targeted and effective social justice policy responses, such as day care centres for working-class mothers, and a universal minimum income. Secondly, even though it is too early in the life of these policies to confidently assess them as transformative and progressive, at this stage we found that while transformation was intended, Barbados' policy initiatives during the pandemic have been path-dependent. The policies investigated offered short-term gains for the benefit of the larger economy, while simultaneously reproducing inequalities among vulnerable groups. These shortfalls can be addressed by incorporating a gender analysis of all intended and present programs as there are possibilities for future policy responses that are truly transformative, feminist and expand democracy and social justice.

Finally, we noted key actors in gender mainstreaming such as the Bureau of Gender Affairs were excluded from relevant policy discussions. The study argues that the strongest indication of the government's commitment to gender equality would be to inject human and financial resources into the national gender machinery. For decades, those in charge of mainstreaming gender in State policymaking have not been given the tools they need to carry out their work effectively.

The dynamism of the pandemic in Barbados is also an instructive indicator that these policies, as well as other social protection measures undertaken by the state could be revisited, perhaps when the current IMF programme ends in September 2022, in order to fully make sense of their impacts on the country. 🌟

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Dr Daniele Bobb

Dr Daniele Bobb is a lecturer at the IGDS:NBU, The UWI, Cave Hill. Her research interest includes gender and development, social policies, mothering, and women and work. She completed a BSc. Psychology with Political Science (First Class Honours) and an MPhil in Political Science at the Cave Hill Campus. She is involved in many outreach and research projects in the areas of youth empowerment, the marginalization of vulnerable groups, gender and infrastructure, gender and religion, and gender and education. Dr Bobb is steadfast in her devotion to the work for gender equity and enhancing the quality of life for all.



Leigh-Ann Worrell

Leigh-Ann Worrell is the Project Coordinator at the Institute for Gender and Development Studies: Nita Barrow Unit. In 2016, she completed a masters in Women's and Gender Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. While there, she also worked as a Sexual Assault Outreach Coordinator at Carleton University's Graduate Students' Association.

She earned her first masters in Social Policy from Beijing Normal University in China, and her Bachelor of Arts in Media and Communication at the University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica.

Leigh-Ann has also worked as a journalist at the Nation newspaper and Barbados's online newspaper, Barbados. Today Leigh-Ann Worrell is the Project Coordinator at the Institute for Gender and Development Studies: Nita Barrow Unit. In 2016, she completed a masters in Women's and Gender Studies at Carleton University in Ottawa, Canada. While there, she also worked as a Sexual Assault Outreach Coordinator at Carleton University's Graduate Students' Association.



**THE PATHWAY
TOWARDS THE
NATIONAL CARE
SYSTEM IN
ARGENTINA**

*by Cecilia Fraga
& Corina Rodríguez Enríquez*

The most recent advances in the process towards the development of a national care system in Argentina coincided temporarily with the global COVID-19 health emergency. The national care system was not born out of the pandemic. Rather, it is the result of years of work within academia, civil society, the women's and feminist movement, and public policy spaces. However, the pandemic shed light on the centrality of care, as well as it exposed how inequality is reproduced through an unjust social organisation of care (SOC).

Indeed, the SOC in Argentina is characterised by a large familist and feminised matrix of care, which is manifest in the persistent gender gap in the time spent on domestic and unpaid care work (Rodríguez Enríquez et al., 2019). It is also evident in the over-representation of women among paid care workers, with low wages and precarious employment conditions, particularly in the domestic work sector.

Likewise, the SOC presents a marked socio-economic inequality in access to care services that derive from insufficient public provision (in terms of coverage and quality) and market provision, which is segmented according to the purchasing power of the population (ELA y Unicef, 2020).

Community arrangements are a key factor in meeting care needs of households living in socially vulnerable environments.

Community arrangements are a key factor in meeting care needs of households living in socially vulnerable environments. Women are also present in this form of care provision taking part in networks involving social organisations, churches, and political parties, food provision, education, and support for children. The integration of care work with the popular economy is becoming increasingly relevant.



Photo | Eric M.V (Rowdy) from Pexels

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The context of COVID-19 exacerbated the role of community arrangements, which accelerated the care agenda. The pandemic converged with the change of government at the national level in December 2019 and the creation of the Ministry of Women, Gender and Diversity. These institutional changes give prominence to the gender agenda and created an unprecedented opportunity for feminism to enter public institutions. In line with the commitments made by Argentina in relation to the Beijing Platform for Action and the successive consensuses resulting from the Regional Women’s Conferences in Latin America and the Caribbean, the Ministry centred care in the public agenda.

The strategy deployed by the Ministry towards the creation of a care system included a series of actions, such as: the creation of the Inter-ministerial Board on Care; the formation of the Federal Map of Care; the creation of the Drafting Commission to draft a Bill for a Comprehensive Care System with a Gender Perspective; and the launching of the National Campaign “Caring with Equality”.

The Territorial Parliaments of Care (TPC) emerged as part of the National Campaign “Caring with Equality.” TPCs are composed by social organisations and institutions for the care of children; the elderly and the disabled; the health and education sectors; community care networks; feminist organisations; provincial and municipal government departments, trade unions and business associations linked to care sectors; representatives of national bodies involved in the issue; and universities and legislative representatives. TPCs are spaces that enable us to learn about the specific care demands in a community; the conditions in

which these demands exist; the relevant actors. Also, the PTCs are sites in which one can understand the consensus and tensions that can arise when it comes to moving forward with the implementation or expansion of specific policies.

A gender order that continues to place women and feminised bodies as the main caregivers stand out together with questions related to the social perception of care as a right

Analysing this process in the light of the Policy Transformations framework (Llavaneras Blanco and Cuervo, 2021), we concluded that the National Care System holds transformative potential for two main reasons. First, the National Care System recognizes the role of community care arrangements in SOCs, as well as how communities can themselves be a locus of transformative care practices. And second, TPCs are a transformative way of building the foundations for social change driven by public policies. The TPCs are spaces that amplify the voice of diverse actors and allow them to dialogue with each other. They are a novel experience with great potential, even though they are not exempt from tensions and errors of inclusion. Their scope will only become evident when the process matures sufficiently to see how many and which of the issues raised within them will actually crystallise into policies.

In tandem, we have also observed some path dependencies that pose obstacles to the transformative potential due to entrenched political, social, and cultural dynamics. In this regard, a gender order that continues to place women and feminised bodies as the main caregivers stand out together with questions related to the social perception of care as a right, and the possibility of undermining the State's responsibility as a care provider.

In general terms, the Policy Transformations research conducted in Argentina invites a broader reflection on the possibilities and limits of generating societal change in countries of the global South and the fundamental importance of the feminist movement (in the streets, in academia, and in government) to leverage transformations in the existing social structure. 🌟

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Cecilia Fraga

Cecilia Fraga is a Sociologist (University of Buenos Aires), Master in Gender Studies and PhD in Social Sciences (El Colegio de México). Postdoctoral Fellow of the Conicet at the Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Public Policy (CIEPP) and lecturer in Social Research Methodology at the Metropolitan University for Education and Work (UMET), Argentina.



Corina Rodríguez Enríquez

Corina Rodríguez Enríquez is a Feminist economist, she earned her Bachelor's degree from the University of Buenos Aires; her MA on Public Policy from the Institute of Social Studies (The Hague – The Netherlands); and PhD on Social Sciences from Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO). She works as a researcher at the Consejo Nacional de Investigaciones Científicas y Técnicas (Conicet) [National Council of Scientific and Technical Research] and at the Centro Interdisciplinario para el Estudio de Políticas Públicas (Ciepp) [Interdisciplinary Centre for the Study of Public Policy] in Buenos Aires, Argentina. Corina is a member of Gem-Lac (Grupo de Género y Macroeconomía de América Latina / Latin American Gender and Macroeconomic Group); a Board member of the International Association for Feminist Economics (IAFFE). Her working areas include: Social and Fiscal Policy, Care Economy, Labour Market, Poverty and Income Distribution.

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