RETHINKING SOCIAL REPRODUCTION IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

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COVID-19 has been spreading rapidly across our globe. As it is spread through close contact, many countries have enforced a form of lockdown requiring populations to stay at home unless for essential travel. These lockdowns have had severe effects on the global economy, particularly on businesses that rely on footfall. At the same time, parks, theatres, gyms, malls, streets and other public and semi-public spaces have been left vacant in the effort to keep people apart. The spatial narratives of the lockdown have largely been focused on the issue of where we *can't* go. In doing so, they contribute to making more invisible the space within which many of us are now spending the majority of our time – the (heavily gendered) space of the home.

For many women, the household has always been a site of work – of social reproduction – but how does this intensify during a global pandemic? As Bhattacharya (2017) asks, 'If workers' labor produces all the wealth in society, who then produces the worker?' Capitalism has long relied on women's (low-)paid and unpaid domestic labor in the home in order to socially reproduce its workers. It shapes the 'activities and attitudes, behaviours and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis, and intergenerationally' (Laslett and Brenner 1989: 382). Put differently, the daily and generational renewal of human life through the social organisation of sexuality, the provision of food, shelter and clothing, and the care of children and the elderly, among other things, is largely taken on by women across the globe in order to produce and reproduce labor power – the ability to work (Ferguson 2017; Laslett and Brenner 1989).

During a global pandemic lockdown, when mobility is restricted and many spaces outside of the home can no longer be accessed, what happens to the social reproduction of the home and its inhabitants? Using this question as an entry point, this article thinks through the ways in which an enforced spatial constraint *to* the home in the time of COVID-19 is shifting the social reproduction *of* the home. More specifically, this article suggests that this spatial constraint during a global pandemic allows us to rethink social reproduction and its manifestations through the interconnected refractions of work, class, violence and mobility.

'Depletion through social reproduction': Unpaid domestic workers

Globally, women carry out at least two and a half times more unpaid household and care work than men, valued at between 10 and 39 per cent of global GDP (ILO 2016). 'WFH' or work-from-home culture which is being promoted as a new societal norm as a result of COVID-19 has implications in terms of increasing domestic workloads. As family members stay within the space of the home for longer periods of time, this results in increasing social reproduction needs, disproportionately falling on the shoulders of women (OECD 2020). As one women's rights advocate put it, 'Women are typically the chief healthcare officer, the chief entertainment officer, the chief education officer in their homes' (Graves 2020), among other responsibilities including, for many, their paid jobs.

For many low-income or working-class women across the world, state restrictions on mobility mean that social reproduction related tasks cannot be carried out, as many women are unable to move outside of their homes to, for example, collect water or firewood (Nevill 2020). Some women, who will be forced to flout restrictions on mobility and social distancing for survival needs, risk state violence as well as the health risks of contracting the virus. Rebecca, a farmer from Zimbabwe, explains:

> At the end of the day, women and girls are at the receiving end of the coronavirus. It will affect us more than anyone else. Why? Because it's us women who do the household chores all the time. We are the ones who fetch firewood for cooking from the bush. We are the ones who fetch water from unprotected wells, and it needs two to three people to pump it. We cannot do social distancing. We are the most at risk (quoted in Nevill 2020).

This intensification of the imbalance of work within and for the household is discussed by Rai and colleagues (2019) in the context of conflict situations. Applying the term 'depletion through social reproduction', they highlight the adverse impact of increased labor in the household as a result of conflict situations. In such situations, the greater demands on women's labor as a result of decreased public resources and depleted physical and social infrastructures, paired with a need to generate more income to cover household necessities due to potential loss of employment, can act as a burden on women's health and wellbeing. In our contemporary case, a global pandemic, we can draw parallels to similar pressures on public infrastructures and resources, with women having to deal with the consequences in order to meet their households' needs.

These impacts can also can also heighten women's vulnerability to violence (Rai *et al.* 2020). True (2012) argues that, in contexts where patterns of gender discrimination and structural violence are already in place, gender-based violence is much more likely to occur. Pandemics and disease outbreaks show a trajectory of increased violence against women, particularly intimate partner violence, with a key factor being economic insecurity and poverty-related stress (O'Donnell *et al.* 2020). In the case of COVID-19 we are seeing a similar trend across the globe, with rapidly increasing instances of domestic violence against women (European Parliament 2020; Godbole 2020; Taub 2020). These increases, rooted in deep patriarchal masculinities, force us to think through the burden of social reproduction and its links to violence against women, as women 'locked-down' in their households continue to socially reproduce them whilst enduring physical and emotional violence.

Trapped: Live-in domestic workers

The social reproduction of the home during COVID-19 is being carried out by live-in domestic workers in many places across the globe (WIEGO 2020). When talking to a Hong Kong based friend recently, she filled me in on the developments of the COVID-19 situation in the city, explaining that live-in domestic workers particularly are suffering. Trapped within households and working 24 hours a day with increased workloads, their usual escape of leaving the house for grocery shopping or other errands is now restricted, as employers fear that workers may contract the coronavirus and bring it into the home. Given that limited spaces are

accessible outside the home, activities that were once chores, including grocery shopping, have been transformed into leisure activities for families, allowing them to venture out of the space they are mostly confined to. 'I'm exhausted!!!' says a message that my friend received from a live-in domestic worker who works for a nearby family.

Additionally, many domestic workers' 'rest day', which is no longer permitted my many employers, involves leaving the house not only for relaxing and socialising, but to run personal errands, including for the majority of domestic workers who are migrants, sending remittances and necessities such as clothes and medicines back home (Chan 2020). NGOs have also found that, in Hong Kong, many live-in domestic workers stay in 'unsuitable' accommodation, often sleeping in spaces which are used for other functions such as toilets, storage rooms, studies or closets, with a lack of privacy (MFMW 2017).

Begum (2020) warns of similar outcomes in the Middle East where, she says, 'we can expect an increase in the number of domestic workers forced to work practically around the clock' faced with 'additional cooking, cleaning and caring demands with entire families at home all day and children out of school' as well as 'more cleaning and disinfecting' due to the virus.

Advocacy groups in the Middle East have observed a rapid rise in the number of abuse complaints by domestic workers, since the pandemic began (Daragahi and Trew 2020). In one of the most horrific abuses reported, somebody in Lebanon attempted to 'sell' a migrant domestic worker for $1000 on a Facebook marketplace page (Daragahi and Trew, 2020). As a global issue, live-in workers around the world are facing dire circumstances (WIEGO 2020).

The geographies of the home and its everyday practices and social relations resonate beyond the household (Blunt and Varley 2004). The state- and employer-enforced spatial containment to the home enforced on live-in domestic workers as a result of COVID-19 reinforces a class boundary between these workers and their employers, with a key factor being no spatial escape for the worker. As workers enact round-the-clock social reproduction, employers are able to enact a round-the-clock surveillance, resulting in new and more extreme forms of exploitation.

Conclusion

Capitalism's reliance on women's (low) paid and unpaid labor is taking new and more extreme exploitative forms in the time of COVID-19. Its new 'spatial fix' (Harvey 2001) is the space where humanity is being asked to spend most of its time – the private household. The social relations - and particularly practices of social reproduction - of this somewhat invisible space, to which many are spatially contained, are shifting as a result of limits on mobility across the globe. Taking new forms, refracted by and into intersecting elements of work, class, violence and mobility, the COVID-19 crisis is transforming women's experiences in the household, for the worse.

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