

Care as a lens on social inequalities and transformations



By Megha Amrith, Max Planck
Institute for the Study of
Religious and Ethnic Diversity

In 1993, Stuart Hall noted that

“the capacity to live with difference is [...] the coming question of the twenty-first century” (1993, p. 361). In a context of twenty-first century global flows and transnational (dis)connections, this a question that holds immense contemporary relevance. I suggest how a global sociological focus on care could provide a generative space to concretely think about living with and engaging difference in everyday, intimate life; that is, through the relationships that sustain households and communities around the world and the social inequalities, boundaries, and transgressions that are expressed within this space.

Like many scholars of care, I first

approached the topic following the foundational feminist sociological literature on the topic in the 1990s, in particular the work on “global care chains”, which focussed on the “international transfer of caretaking” (Parreñas, 2000, p. 561) and the “series of personal links between people across the globe based on the paid or unpaid work of caring” (Hochschild, 2000, p. 131). The global connections between women from the Global South and societies of the Global North, makes this topic central to global sociology and reflects the “connected sociologies” (Bhambra, 2014) of different regions of the world, connected as they are through historically-constituted inequalities. The key contributions

of this earlier sociological literature to the broader field of care have been to illuminate the commodification of care and how this produces and perpetuates the dispensability of migrant workers and the forms of exploitation they experience in global care economies; and to shed light on the contemporary feminization of migration, given that paid care work is increasingly undertaken by racialized migrant women from lower-income countries whose work remains undervalued. There are new demands for different kinds of care work globally contributing to a pattern of women leaving their families in lower-income countries to travel to higher-income countries. These women, in turn, hire other women in their countries

of origin to do the caring labour at home, or they rely on family members to do the unpaid care work (Rinaldo, 2024), while continuing transnational care responsibilities in a complex global web of care.

As an anthropologist by training, these sociological perspectives have been central to understanding the broader structures of care work globally, while also shedding light on migrant women's agency in contesting particular structures of exploitation through activism or through everyday acts of resistance. My own ethnographic research has largely focussed on migrant women in the domestic and care work sectors – from the migration of nurses from the Philippines to Singapore; and of

**ageing domestic workers of
different nationalities moving
within Asia.**



**Photo 1: Migrant women play a central role in caring
for households and families in the busy and unequal
global city of Singapore.**

**Through this ethnographic work,
however, I have often found it
necessary to think beyond a “care
chains” analysis as it tends to**

presume a particular linearity in migrant women's mobilities, while also focusing primarily on Global South to North movements. Equally important are South-South or intraregional movements and inequalities, which enable moving beyond thinking about women from the Global South as victims of global commodification processes, existing solely to service the care needs of those in the North. Thinking beyond care chains might also enable more expansive understanding of care as space for negotiating forms of social and political belonging (Coe, 2019). The two ethnographic examples that follow demonstrate how a focus on intimacy and encounter in care work can challenge paradigms that focus exclusively on victimization to

centre migrant women's agency in ways that go beyond resistance (Vorhölter, 2024). They further reveal how social categories and differences are bridged, reinforced, and negotiated through care.

Singapore, a city at the centre of global capitalist and transnational migration flows, espouses a strong orientation towards "filial piety" and kinship care for its ageing population. Families, nonetheless, increasingly turn towards migrant care workers to look after the older adults in their families either at home or in stigmatised nursing homes funded by charitable religious foundations. There is little investment by the state in eldercare, alongside a devaluation

of eldercare work, echoing the literature on global care work emphasising low wages, long hours, and poor social protections of labour and welfare. The nursing home is characterised by cultural and linguistic diversity – Singaporean Chinese, Indian and Malay patients are cared for by nurses from China, India, and the Philippines and the languages one hears include Hokkien, Cantonese, Malay, Tamil, and Tagalog. Racialized ideas about darker-skinned nurses from India and the Philippines touching Chinese bodies, for example, co-exist alongside commonalities among Catholics who share faith across different ethnic and linguistic backgrounds. Over time, bonds develop between the nursing home

residents and their migrant caregivers through the everyday interactions of care work: feeding, bathing, cleaning, taking the residents to physiotherapy and making sure they are comfortable. The residents lament that their children are too busy to visit them, while the caregivers share that longing for their families who live far away. They share solitude, watch Korean soap operas together, and they jointly complain about the rising cost of living in a global city in which they remain on the margins in forms of implicit, 'horizontal' solidarity. Despite developing close relationships with those for whom they care, the conditions of work are not attractive enough for caregivers who have global and professional

aspirations for a 'better life', ultimately making this a space of fleeting encounters. These intimate encounters, nonetheless, transform caregivers' sense of relational ethics – as those doing the 'good' work of caring for others– while also broadening their social understandings of the world through these encounters with difference. This space further reflects the broader social landscape of care, shaped as it is by local, regional, and global dynamics. Yet the relationships and encounters within these landscapes cannot be grasped only through the globalised power inequalities that shape them (Burchardt, 2022).

It requires living with others, touching the bodies of others,

feeding and caring for them. Sometimes these caring relationships are spoken about in a language of kinship (Amrith & Coe, 2022), where there are attempts to bridge the class, gender, and racialized differences between employer and worker. Acknowledging the vast sociological literature and the social movements on domestic work which highlight kinship as a mode of further exploitation of domestic workers, we must nonetheless also take seriously the narratives of those domestic workers who speak of the importance of kin relations with their employers. In politically restrictive contexts like Singapore and in the absence of social movements to incorporate domestic work as work into local labour

laws, I found that kinning through the everyday intimacies of care work remains important as a means to establish a sense of belonging, as well as reinforce their social value. I appreciate here Carol Chan and Rosario Fernández-Ossandóns's (2022) argument of domestic worker-employer relationships in Chile that care "cannot be free from or reduced to power in these racialized affective labor relations". Similar dynamics are evident in different contexts of the Global South where contractual claims often co-exist with kinship claims to belonging (see e.g. Bioacchi, 2023) yet are always fraught with ambivalences given that class and racialized boundaries are often reasserted in multiple ways in these intimate

spaces. Women's migration trajectories, however, are not exclusively shaped by their labour. While migrant women's journeys in the care chains literature is often framed in terms of a "sacrifice" for their families and their nations, women's own life projects overturn a number of these normative assumptions about them being "absent mothers" or victims of globalization. Beyond the household, migration might offer the possibilities for pursuing diverse aspirations through the arts, education, self-transformation and to participate in "intimate counter-spaces" in public with other migrants (Pande, 2012, p. 2), which "challenge various levels of exclusions by the state, their employers, and society

at large” and allow for being in the world beyond the categories into which they are normally placed as racialized migrant women in the global care economy.



Photo 2: Friendship and solidarity are important dimensions to migrant women's experiences abroad.

These two examples demonstrate that while encounters in care work in

the global economy are reflective of enduring social and economic inequalities on a range of scales, these encounters might generate new forms of belonging and challenge normative public discourses on what care ought to look like. Starting from the narratives of these transnational actors can offer a lens onto understanding global (dis)connectivities and potential transformations, as well as the different scales of experience that are constitutive of global sociology. They further illuminate the importance of considering experiences where the Global North is not the sole reference point. These stories from the field can be scaled up to do the analytical work, as Tatjana Thelen (2015, p. 497) puts it, to examine care's

potential to overcome “commonplace dichotomies such as private-public, good-bad, modern-traditional, and micro-macro” and to counter still persistent perceptions of care as “private” rather than a central aspect of human social, economic, and political life. Beyond care labour, care – with all of its ambivalences and tensions – remains central to social relationships in a range of contexts, in relation to climate change, geopolitical uncertainty, austerity, and social and political division. Recentring care as a global sociological concern might enable a deeper understanding of how people experience social inequalities in intimate ways, while also reconfiguring notions of social difference and social norms, at

home and in the world.

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