

Assessment

The Devaluation of Essential Work: An Assessment of the 2023 ILO Report

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ILO, *World Employment and Social Outlook 2023: The Value of Essential Work*. Geneva: International Labour Office, 2023. xxv + 254 pp. www.ilo.org/publications/flagship-reports/world-employment-and-social-outlook-2023-value-essential-work

INTRODUCTION

The value of essential work, while long debated, became a central point of discussion during the COVID-19 pandemic, when workers across the world continued to perform what was deemed essential work while exposed to multiple risks. The 2023 International Labour Organization (ILO) flagship report *World Employment and Social Outlook 2023: The Value of Essential Work* rekindles this discussion by shedding light on the persisting disparities during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic between the societal recognition of certain types of work as essential and the actual conditions faced by those performing such work. Despite public expressions of gratitude during the pandemic, tangible improvements in working conditions for this group of workers have largely failed to materialize. In some cases, the mental and physical well-being of these workers has even deteriorated in the long run.

This Assessment explores the key insights and limitations of the report from a feminist political economy perspective attuned to power dynamics across various scales. The report provides valuable data on essential or key workers and enterprises, elucidating who they are as well as their working conditions both before and during the pandemic. Essential or key workers are defined in the report as those people in occupations deemed essential by 126 countries at the onset of the pandemic in March and April 2020, bar those workers who could carry out essential work from home. Importantly, the report centres the paradoxical nature of essential

Development and Change 0(0): 1–21. DOI: 10.1111/dech.12844

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work — its recognition as vital for meeting the needs of society and its severe undervaluation despite this. However, it fails to consider that essential work is not merely a reflection of societal needs but is also a result of class struggles, political negotiations and historical biases. The ILO's adoption of a universal definition of essential work therefore obscures the contested nature of this category that was used by governments worldwide during the pandemic. Furthermore, the report lacks an explanation for *why* essential work is undervalued, offering useful but limited policy recommendations. This article argues that the devaluation of essential work stems from a fundamental dilemma within contemporary capitalism: its inherent tendency to destabilize the conditions necessary for social reproduction.

Before proceeding, a clarification of terminology is necessary. In the report, the ILO acknowledges that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the terms 'key worker' and 'essential worker' were often used interchangeably — something that is reflected in literature, policy and public discourse. However, the term 'key worker' is used in the report because the term 'essential services' is cited as being frequently associated with legislative restrictions regarding the right to go on strike for certain groups of workers. This essay does not intervene in debates on essential services legislation, as the focus is clearly placed on work and workers from a (feminist) political economy lens; hence, the terms 'essential' and 'key' work or workers are used interchangeably here.

The second section of this Assessment explores the report's noteworthy contributions, while the third section examines its limitations in grasping the true nature of the essential work category. The fourth section critiques its failure to provide an adequate framework for understanding the devaluation of essential work, and the final section offers a brief conclusion. Throughout this analysis, the urgency of a paradigm shift in economic thought is underscored. Such a shift is imperative for recognizing the interconnected nature of value creation, gendered and racialized labour and global hierarchies — and for truly valuing the work that is essential for social and societal reproduction.

KEY INSIGHTS FROM THE REPORT

The ILO report makes a crucial intervention by foregrounding the misalignment between the poor economic and/or social recognition of essential work and the vital contribution this work makes to society. This stark contrast was immediately visible from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, as highlighted in early reflections on the use of essential work designations in response to the pandemic (e.g. *The Lancet*, 2020; Reid et al., 2021; Stevano, Ali and Jamieson, 2021a). This was further demonstrated by public expressions of appreciation for essential workers during the lockdowns (Catungal, 2021), at least in some countries. Yet, in the aftermath of the pandemic,

symbolic forms of appreciation for key workers have failed to translate into concrete gains for these workers (Farris and Bergfeld, 2022). Aside from one-off bonuses paid to selected categories of workers, especially in the health sector (as mentioned in the report), and some relief measures such as an increase in cash transfers, food aid and utility bill waivers targeting vulnerable populations (including at times some essential informal workers) (Chen et al., 2021), there is very little evidence of long-term changes in the working conditions of key workers across the globe. Any changes that have taken place are likely negative for many key workers due to long-term effects of poor working conditions on their mental health and well-being (see, for example, Chowdhury et al., 2022) and the compounding negative effects of inflation on the living conditions of low-paid workers worldwide (ILO, 2022; Lapavitsas et al., 2023).

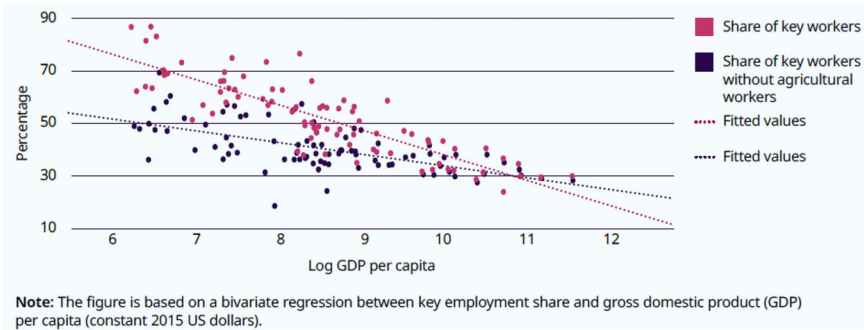
The report does not provide a systematic analysis of the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic on key workers and enterprises — that is, those consequences extending beyond the pandemic; it is more focused on mapping the low compensation and poor working conditions of key workers before and during the pandemic, with a view to proposing a set of recommendations to address these concerns. In doing so, it draws attention to essential work itself, highlighting the misalignment between its economic and social value but failing to provide a robust explanation for this gap — a shortcoming that will be discussed in later sections. Nevertheless, the report makes two important contributions. First, it provides a wealth of data on key workers and enterprises. Second, it emphasizes the ambivalent nature of essential work. These contributions are discussed in the following sections before I turn to reflect on the limitations of the report.

Data on Key Workers

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, in March and April 2020, 126 countries developed a classification of essential work. Most of the countries that did not issue such classifications are in Africa and Asia. The report adopts a definition of essential work that focuses on the similarities between countries, i.e. the sectors deemed to be essential by 90 of the 126 countries¹ and the occupations within these sectors that could not be performed from home. Thus, it defines key workers as those in key occupations within key sectors, excluding key teleworking occupations. This emerging definition identifies essential workers as those ‘engaging in a profession that serves the fundamental needs of societies and facing a greater risk during the pandemic of exposure to and illness from the virus by the mere action of leaving the safety of their home to perform their work’ (p. 6). The report focuses on

1. Given the emphasis on similarities across countries, presumably these occurred in the classifications adopted by 90 countries, rather than 126 countries.

Figure 1. An Inverse Relationship between Income Level and Share of Key Workers



Source: ILO 2023 report, p. 12, Fig. 1.4.

workers in eight occupational categories: i) food system workers; ii) health workers; iii) retail workers; iv) security workers; v) manual workers; vi) cleaning and sanitation workers; vii) transport workers; and viii) technicians and clerical workers.

While much academic and non-academic literature on essential work has considered case studies at specific points during the pandemic, the report offers a comprehensive set of data that provides a global overview of key workers (Chapter 1), how their working conditions compare to those of non-key workers and how they have been affected by the pandemic (Chapters 2–4). This holistic approach, drawing on both statistics and qualitative data, is certainly a plus. For instance, the report reveals that the number of key workers in a country is inversely related to the country's per capita GDP; in other words, lower-income countries have higher shares of key workers among the employed population relative to high-income countries, even when workers in the agricultural sector are excluded (see the report, p. 12, Figure 1.4).

In addition, in low-income countries, 87 per cent of key workers are self-employed, and 95 per cent are classified as informal. A section of the report is dedicated to a brief discussion of the specific challenges faced by informal workers, including ambiguity and variation regarding their classification as essential or not. In fact, the same research referenced in the ILO report, which is based on a WIEGO-led study on 'The COVID-19 crisis and the informal economy' (see Orleans Reed, 2022), highlights in much starker terms the significant challenges and inconsistencies in applying essential work designations to informal work and how, as a result, these designations were often inconsequential for many informal workers (ibid.). The report also shows that the majority of key workers are men, except in the health and retail sectors, where women account for 66 per cent and 58 per cent, respectively, and that one in five key workers in high-income countries is an international migrant. However, beyond this consideration for inter-national

migrant workers in the Global North, the report lacks systematic data on racial and/or ethnic minorities among key workers. Racial dynamics are occasionally mentioned in relation to specific studies that offer relevant analyses, but the available country-level data do not support a systemic analysis of racial relations among key workers.

Possibly one of the most interesting findings is what could be termed a ‘key worker pay gap’,² with the report indicating that, on average, key workers are paid less than non-key workers: ‘Most key paid employees are located at the bottom of the wage distribution. Globally, 48 per cent of key employees were in the first two quintiles of the wage distribution, meaning that their hourly wages were less than the wages earned by 60 per cent of all employees’ (p. 83). Mainstream economic theory would attribute the pay gap to differentials in human capital, such as education, skills and experience (Becker, 1994; Psacharopoulos and Patrinos, 2004). However, the report finds that approximately two thirds of the pay gap can be attributed to differences in education and experience, leaving one third unexplained³ — a finding that is vaguely reminiscent of debates on the gender pay gap, where pay differentials between women and men are still only minimally explained by gender differences in education levels (Blau and Kahn, 2017). Interestingly, among key workers, while there is a global gender pay gap, in developing countries, the gender pay gap is negative, favouring women. Given evidence on increasing within-group inequality in earnings (Leicht, 2008; O’Reilly et al., 2015), it would have been useful to explore variations within groups of key workers not only by gender but also by race/ethnicity and migration status. The global outlook is both a strength and a weakness in that it offers comprehensive coverage, but limits the possibility of looking at specific contexts and cases with some level of detail, despite efforts to employ a wealth of case study evidence from across the world.

The Ambivalent Nature of Essential Work

Beyond the various meanings that can be attributed to ‘key’ or ‘essential’ work, an issue discussed in the next section, this category is inherently ambiguous. The report captures two key sources of ambivalence relatively well: poor working conditions while performing essential work; and staying employed while becoming more exposed to a range of risks to both mental and physical well-being. I will briefly discuss each of these issues in turn.

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2. On average, key workers earn 26 per cent less than non-key workers and the gap tends to be larger in low- and lower-income countries relative to upper-middle- and high-income countries (see Figure 3.14 of the report, p. 87).
 3. More details about this investigation can be found in Section 3.5 of the report.

As already highlighted, a central theme of the report is that key workers performed work deemed essential during the pandemic while being underpaid and vulnerable to deficient working conditions. These conditions are systemic but became more visible and/or were exacerbated during the pandemic, which acted as a ‘magnifying glass’ (Stevano et al., 2021). For instance, the report discusses how the pandemic underscored the importance of updating occupational health and safety measures to move from a focus only on preventing physical harm at work to a broader focus encompassing mental health, violence and harassment risks. Further, many key workers are excluded from occupational health and safety provisions through informality and sub-contracting (Kesar, 2024). The extent of unionization varies considerably by country and sector, with food systems and retail notably lagging behind in this respect due to widespread self-employment, a high turnover, the use by companies of unregulated migrant labour and temporary contracts. Additionally, certain occupational groups are shown to have precarious contractual arrangements, as is the case for outsourced workers in the cleaning and security sectors and the use of agencies to contract key workers in the health sector. Finally, key workers are more likely to be affected by long or inadequate working hours. In summary, the report paints a bleak picture of working conditions among key workers, while acknowledging significant variations depending on context and occupation.

Chapter 4 of the report, one of the most compelling from my perspective, goes into more detail by focusing on specific occupational groups. To provide an example, food system workers, who represent 35 per cent of all key workers, emerged as one of the most vulnerable worker groups during the pandemic. Their vulnerability stemmed from the high proportion of migrant workers working in the sector who faced mobility restrictions, deteriorating working conditions and inadequate housing conditions, in addition to their systemic exclusion from social protection systems and their subjection to low wages across the sector (often owing to exclusion from or adverse integration into minimum wage policies). The evidence presented in the report is valuable, even if it lacks a conceptual framework that allows for a structured understanding of the systemic (super-)exploitation of key workers — a limitation I will return to later.

The second type of ambivalence is addressed from a particular angle: the occupational risk and strain of working during the pandemic (Chapter 2). The ‘job-strain approach’ used as a framework in this chapter of the report is individualistic, as it is based on assessing the balance between demands and resources available to an individual worker in the workplace. This approach seems rather incongruous in the context of widespread informality, self-employment and ‘atypical’ contractual arrangements outlined later in the report. Nevertheless, some interesting evidence is laid out, the most striking of which concerns the relationship between occupation type and mortality, which proves more complex than one might presume. The evidence presented in the report of the excess mortality rate having been higher among

key workers relative to non-key workers is not clear-cut, at least not for all occupational groups. For instance, although health workers were clearly highly exposed to the virus, the excess mortality rate tended to decline after the initial phase of the pandemic, presumably due to improved access to protective equipment. Conversely, transport workers faced a heightened risk of COVID-19 mortality across various contexts, likely because, the report tentatively proposes, these workers had very low levels of protection. Beyond mortality statistics, there is widespread evidence that key workers suffered from isolation, heightened work intensity and deteriorating mental health.

Yet, even as key workers were exposed to elevated physical and mental health risks, the ‘essential’ label did ensure some job and income security for some — but not all — key workers. Some firms shifted their production to essential goods, which allowed them to continue operations (Seetharaman, 2020). This is a dimension of the second type of ambivalence that the report does not address, but it is significant since the working class was divided into those deemed essential or those facing unemployment (Saad-Filho, 2021). The adverse effects of unemployment were especially stark where the state lacked the fiscal space to provide income support. Moreover, being classified as essential did not always guarantee workers an income, especially for many informal workers and those on the bottom rungs of global supply chains (Stevano, Ali and Jamieson, 2021a). In Durban, for example, only 5 per cent of essential food traders continued working in April 2020; in Accra, 58 per cent of essential street and market vendors could continue working (Orleans Reed, 2022). Reasons for this variation include unclear essential work designations and bureaucratic bottlenecks in obtaining permits (*ibid.*).

ESSENTIAL WORK AS CONTESTED CATEGORY

I will now discuss more significant omissions and blind spots in the report. It is understandable that the report had to establish an operational definition of essential work that, although imperfect, would allow for a global analysis of the experiences of essential workers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted in the preceding section, the report defines essential work based on the similarities in classifications adopted by several countries. However, beyond the inevitable simplification of essential work, two glaring omissions are apparent: first, the report overlooks the considerable discrepancies in how essential work was designated across countries and, second, it neglects to account for the processes of contestation and power struggles that shaped these classifications, which during the pandemic determined who could continue working and who could not. A significant implication of these omissions is that the assertion made by national governments of essential work ‘serving the essential needs of society’ demands further scrutiny, particularly in light of recent evidence showing otherwise.

Highlighting both the discrepancies and similarities in essential work designations is fundamental for understanding how governments define essential work. In an early study of essential work during the COVID-19 pandemic, based on research we conducted from March to July 2020, we argued that the term is far more ambiguous than it initially appears (Stevano, Ali and Jamieson, 2021a). We pointed out that, at first, there was no universally recognized definition of essential work and that its usage prior to the pandemic was quite sparse, ad hoc and context-specific (*ibid.*). Our account of the usage of the term before the pandemic is confirmed to some extent by the ILO report, which provides a brief historical overview of its use and shows that it was used especially during wartime, previous pandemics and in the context of preventing certain groups of workers from participating in industrial action. However, interpretations of essential services continue to vary (Knäbe and Carrión-Crespo, 2019), as illustrated for example by the UK Conservative government's recent introduction of the Strikes (Minimum Services Levels) Bill that limits workers' ability to go on strike in the health, transport and education sectors.⁴

The lack of consensus on what constitutes essential work persisted during the pandemic. Our analysis across seven countries (Brazil, Canada, England, India, Italy, Mozambique and South Africa) revealed that they had only 13 out of 53 essential work categories completely in common (Stevano, Ali and Jamieson, 2021a). For example, agriculture, forestry and aquaculture were designated as essential sectors in Canada, India, Italy, Mozambique and South Africa; natural disaster monitoring in Brazil, India and South Africa; and mining in Brazil, Canada, India, Italy and South Africa. Regarding manufacturing, all countries restricted production to inputs necessary for the provision of what were considered essential goods and services, except Brazil, which permitted all industrial activity. Only South Africa and Italy included paid domestic work, with the former restricting this to live-in staff. England did not classify cleaning staff as essential, while Brazil and Mozambique did not include care personnel. Although the list of discrepancies is longer (the reader can refer to Table 1 in Stevano, Ali and Jamieson, 2021a), these examples illustrate such differences and how they are rooted in existing biases as well as different economic, social and political contexts (*ibid.*; see also Orleans Reed, 2022). Unevenness has also been documented in the informal economy, where market traders and food street vendors were more likely to be classified as essential, while waste pickers were included in some cities only and domestic workers and home-based workers were the least likely to be considered essential (Orleans Reed, 2022).

Far from being a process driven solely by the logic of 'serving the essential needs of society', as suggested by the ILO report, the categorization of

4. The bill passed into law in July 2023. See: <https://bills.parliament.uk/bills/3396>

essential work was strongly contested and fundamentally political. At the onset of the pandemic, its anticipated impact on capital accumulation was expected to be catastrophic (Grigera, 2022), to the point that the head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) described COVID-19 as a ‘crisis like no other’, as global economic activity slowed down at a rate not seen since the Great Depression (Georgieva, 2020). In this context, it is not surprising that capital sought to protect itself from the economic downturn and that industrial capital lobbied for concessions from the state to maintain operations during the lockdowns — a move heightened by a rhetoric of ‘health versus the economy’ that gained traction in some quarters but was quickly debunked (Deaton, 2021). Nevertheless, power struggles, or more specifically class struggles, significantly informed the designation of essential work in the early stages of the pandemic. In Italy, the first country after China to become severely affected by the pandemic, the delay in halting productive and commercial activities was attributed to the lobbying activities of Confindustria, the umbrella organization for employers, which is particularly powerful in Lombardy, the region where COVID-19 spread most rapidly at the onset of the pandemic (Tassinari et al., 2020). Larger trade unions responded meekly, while smaller rank-and-file trade unions opted for a more militant approach, with workers even engaging in wildcat strikes to demand adequate health and safety measures (*ibid.*). In the UK, the absence of a definition of essential goods allowed multinational technology company Amazon to continue delivering all sorts of goods, making it one of the top winners of the pandemic as the value of its stock reached an all-time high (Braithwaite, 2020; Stevano, Ali and Jamieson, 2021a).

In the Global South, where governments had limited fiscal space to protect workers and due to their long-standing ambiguous relationship with informal work, various associations representing informal workers campaigned to have certain jobs included in essential work classifications (Orleans Reed, 2022). For example, by putting pressure on their respective national governments, the South African Informal Traders Alliance and the National Association of Street Vendors of India succeeded in having street vendors selling foodstuffs recognized as essential workers (*ibid.*).

In summary, there is much evidence indicating that essential work designations emerged from class struggles that unfolded in different ways depending on contextual specificities. Labour fought to protect its health and earnings; capital fought to maximize profits. Depending on how these forces played out, states made decisions that were driven either by the imperative to protect life and humanity or by the choice to protect capital accumulation, even where it was not needed for the sustenance of workers (for example, by paying them wages). They might even have been implicated in workers’ exposure to the virus.

WHY ARE KEY WORKERS LESS VALUED?

The report extensively details how the working conditions of key workers are generally worse than those of non-key workers, as discussed above. However, no satisfactory explanation is given for key workers' systematic subjection to poor working conditions. Understanding the underlying causes of the devaluation of essential work is critical for charting a path towards change, which is one of the aims of the report. While interesting and promising policies are put forward, including various measures to advance the decent work agenda as well as sectoral investments (see Chapters 5 and 6 of the report), it largely falls short by failing to recognize — and therefore to address — the structural determinants of the devaluation of essential work.

Low Wages and Super-exploitation

The determinants of wages and working conditions are misidentified in the report. In the initial sections of the report, where this important aspect is briefly acknowledged, it is recognized that 'wage-setting is a complex process that reflects demand for the goods or services being provided, and the supply of labour, but also long-established social norms about occupational prestige and hierarchy' (p. 4). As such, the report elaborates, cleaning and sanitation workers receive low wages due to their perceived low occupational prestige, while workers in feminized fields like caregiving experience lower earnings due to the 'care penalty'.⁵ Therefore, according to the report, the setting of wages based on marginal productivity results in a skewed valuation that prioritizes market demands over societal needs. Although it is useful to recognize the complexity of factors underpinning wages and working conditions across sectors and occupations, the brief explanation offered in the report creates more confusion than clarity. In particular, it is crucial to challenge the assertion that (low) productivity levels justify low pay for key workers. There is substantial evidence suggesting that the relationship between wages and marginal productivity of labour, as proposed in human capital theories from the 1960s, is more multifaceted than initially thought (e.g. Schultz, 1961). Recent empirical evidence indicates, for instance, a decoupling of wages from productivity growth in OECD countries (OECD, 2018), occurring alongside a shift in long-term labour losses relative to capital during the neoliberal era (Karabarbounis and Neiman, 2014).

5. The 'care penalty' can refer to two aspects of gendered disadvantage, indicating either an hourly wage gap of between 4 and 40 per cent for care workers and those in other sectors, or a 'motherhood penalty', the latter a term developed by Budig and England (2001) to indicate lower earnings among workers with children compared to those without (Cantillon et al., 2023).

Setting aside mainstream economics' evolving engagements with the relationship between productivity and wages (Card et al., 2018), along with critiques from Marxian scholars (e.g. Bowles and Gintis, 1975) and feminist scholars (e.g. Folbre, 2012), this essay now turns to the dynamics of exploitation on a global scale. To address the question of essential work, we need to place the relationship between wages and productivity within the context of global hierarchies. In the study of labour within global value chains, Suwandi (2019) contends that it is precisely the low unit labour cost — that is, the average cost of labour per unit of real output⁶ — that attracts multinational corporations to countries in the Global South, as it is linked to low wages and high productivity (ibid.). Multinational corporations headquartered in the Global North can extract surplus value through the super-exploitation of workers in the Global South; thus, the pursuit of global capital of locations with low unit labour costs reflects persisting hierarchies between the Global South and the Global North (ibid.). The evidence suggests that productivity rates in sectors or firms in lower-income countries match and at times exceed those of their counterparts in higher-income countries. For example, Mexico and India exhibit higher productivity rates than the US and Germany in the automobile industry, and Brazil, Thailand and Mexico have higher productivity rates than the US and Germany in the textiles industry (Selwyn, 2016). However, wages paid to workers in lower-income regions are much lower proportionally (ibid.). Suwandi (2019) also demonstrates that unit labour costs in manufacturing have consistently been much lower in Mexico, Indonesia, China and India compared to Germany, the US, UK and Japan between 1995 and 2014. Although manufacturing jobs would not have been included in essential work designations in many cases, these arguments extend to essential workers in the food industry and related transport activities, which are predominantly organized within global production networks. In short, wage differentials persist as a significant mechanism of unequal exchange in today's global economy, as highlighted by Suwandi, who notes that 'the global labour arbitrage is rooted in structural factors in capitalist world economy that generate very different prices for labour in the global South and the global North, and hence very different rates of labour exploitation' (Suwandi, 2019: 33).⁷ Uneven economic relations, at first established through overt colonial domination, endure in the contemporary economy, even as much industrial production has been relocated to the Global South since the 1980s (Hickel et al., 2022). In international trade, activities seen as creating more 'added value' in fact better reflect the ability of some economic actors to command prices (ibid.). A significant challenge in modern economic thought is the perception of prices as naturally determined by market forces, thereby also

6. The unit labour cost accounts for both wage and labour productivity, therefore serving as a proxy for the rate of exploitation (Suwandi, 2019).

7. See also Emmanuel (1972), Amin (1976), Bieler and Morton (2014).

serving as indicators of value, which contrasts with earlier understandings of value as determining price,⁸ rather than vice versa.⁹

Crucially, trajectories of uneven development not only denote power dynamics between the core and the periphery but also entail specific forms of gendered and racialized oppression. Ever since European colonial expansion to the West starting in the 16th century, and the advent of capitalism, the resulting global division of labour has established hierarchies that characterize certain types of work and activities as more or less valuable, or not valuable at all. These hierarchies have been sustained and reinforced by the instrumentalization of class, gender and race relations, which has led to the clustering of particular social groups around particular occupations and/or sectors. In essence, capitalist development did not result in the formation of a largely homogeneous working class; instead, it gave rise to a heterogeneous working class structured primarily by gender and racial difference (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Federici, 2004). As women in the Global South became part of the emerging labour-intensive, export-oriented industry, feminists cautioned about the dangers of super-exploitation and the burden of double work for women (Elson and Pearson, 1981). To this day, various forms of racialization continue to underpin both the (adverse) inclusion in and exclusion from global production networks (Bhattacharyya, 2018; Stevano, 2022). Importantly, as the concept of the Global South also denotes the persistence in the Global North of a ‘relationship premised on difference’ (Sud and Sánchez-Ancochea, 2022: 1125), it is not incidental that many essential workers are migrants (as noted in the report) and that certain sectors designated as essential during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as food, domestic work and sanitation, show a high concentration of people of colour or from lower castes in the case of India (Stevano et al., 2021) — a topic that the report does not discuss in much detail.

The over-representation of vulnerable and marginalized socio-economic groups among key workers signals that necessity — and the lack of better alternatives — drives people into poorly paid jobs. For example, research on women’s labour force participation has clearly shown that women are pushed into the labour market out of necessity, especially in lower-income settings (Klasen and Pieters, 2012). This explains why there is a clustering of women from poor backgrounds, many of whom are divorced or widowed, in various types of poorly compensated jobs (Heintz et al., 2018; Oya and Sender, 2009). In certain occupations, such as agricultural and food work as well as

8. In classical political economy scholarship (e.g. Smith and Ricardo) and its critiques (e.g. Marx), the concept of value in terms of creation, appropriation and distribution among social classes is pivotal. According to this framework, the value of a commodity is determined by the amount of labour needed for its production and, consequently, the cost of reproducing labour (that is, the subsistence wage) influences the price of the commodity (Mazzucato, 2019; Pasinetti, 2000).

9. See, for example, Mazzucato (2019).

various forms of work in the informal economy, low wages and substandard conditions are dictated by limited alternative employment opportunities and global structures that grant a minimal share of value to workers positioned at the bottom of global value chains, as previously discussed. In other essential fields like healthcare and education, the demand for care and the intrinsic motivation of those working in these sectors have frequently contributed to the suppression of wages (England et al., 2002). Even in these cases, as evidenced by the global shortage of nurses, global asymmetries come into play in determining the migration of nurses from poorer to richer countries, in ways considered to be akin to accumulation by dispossession (Valiani, 2012).

Toward a Feminist Structural Understanding of Devaluation

The discussion so far has underscored the necessity of a structural analysis of the devaluation of essential work. As critical engagements with the notion of value have been eschewed by the collapse of the market price as an expression of value (Mazzucato, 2019), many important forms of labour have become undervalued — the result not of the failure of markets, but of broader deficiencies in economic thought. As a society, we increasingly struggle to correctly value the activities that contribute to our collective well-being and our ability to sustain life. From a feminist perspective, the work and activities that facilitate ‘life-making’ (Bhattacharya, 2020) — those constituting social reproduction — are those that are most fundamental for meeting the needs of humanity and the planet (Barca, 2020). One very significant caveat is that within a capitalist system, life-making is entangled with profit-making; therefore, social reproduction is to be understood not as a ‘separate sphere’ but rather as mutually constituted and in tension with capitalist production (Katz, 2001; Mezzadri et al., forthcoming).¹⁰ Nevertheless, a wealth of feminist scholarship has exposed and challenged the ways in which social reproduction has been subjected to processes of subordination and devaluation throughout the history of capitalism (e.g. Federici, 2004; Mies, 1986). The physical and emotional labour essential for sustaining human life and perpetuating capitalist relations has been undervalued, obscured or even dismissed as non-work, as in the case of unpaid care. How did this devaluation occur? At least four main processes underlie the subordination and devaluation of social reproduction work: i) the separation of household and factory production; ii) the exclusion of some types of reproductive work from economic indicators;

10. It should also be noted that, as social reproduction is crucial for perpetuating capitalist relations, its supposed ‘benign’ nature has been called into question (Munro, 2023). Yet, a key question remains: can social reproduction also offer a platform for resistance and the reorganization of life that could challenge its entanglements with capitalist reproduction?

iii) the privatization and fragmentation of social reproduction; and iv) the categorization of certain tasks as unskilled labour. I will briefly discuss each of these processes and will explain how this discussion is relevant to understanding the devaluation of essential work.

Industrialization brought about a significant transformation: the separation of household and factory production (Davis, 1981). Tasks previously carried out at home, primarily by women, were migrated to factories. This transformation was marked by a revaluation of economic production: goods produced in the home served own consumption needs, thus representing use-values in a Marxist framework, whereas factory-produced commodities became exchange-values that yielded profits for capitalists (*ibid.*). Whether unpaid housework itself generates value has become a focal point in the prominent domestic labour debate;¹¹ a review of those arguments is beyond the scope of this article. The aspect highlighted here is that the separation of household and factory production in the terms described by Davis led to the subordination of housework within the capitalist vision of the economy. Even when home-based work is integrated into capitalist production, as in the case of outsourced home-based work, its invisibilization contributes to its devaluation (Chen, 2012; Mezzadri and Fan, 2018; Mies, 1982). Regarding essential work, it is plausible to suggest that home-based occupations, such as domestic work and home-based outsourced work in key sectors, have been systemically devalued.

Furthermore, the devaluation of unpaid social reproduction work within households and communities¹² has been institutionalized in GDP, the primary indicator of economic activity and a main focus of policy making. The System of National Accounts (SNA), an accounting tool used by governments to calculate national GDP statistics, specifically excludes unpaid household services and many environmental assets from the total monetary value of goods and services produced in a country (Waring, 1988). This system creates a ‘production boundary’ that encompasses all forms of market production of goods and services for others, the household production of goods for own consumption (such as agricultural produce) and housing services for own consumption by owner-occupiers, while excluding unpaid household services (such as cleaning, cooking and caregiving) (Eurostat, 2010). Unpaid household services continue to be excluded from GDP calculations despite long-standing efforts by feminist scholars to include unpaid care work (Hoskyns and Rai, 2007) — a position based on the acceptance that price is in essence equivalent to value. The exclusion of unpaid care work from the production boundary has become

11. See, for example, Mezzadri (2021).

12. Banks (2020) offers an important corrective to the tendency in feminist economics to focus on unpaid care work within households by showing how Black women in the United States engage in extensive unpaid collective work within their communities. A similar argument can be made regarding kinship and community roles in African societies.

deeply entrenched, to the extent that designations of essential work have completely neglected this form of work (Stevano, Ali and Jamieson, 2021a). This is a critical omission, especially when considering the claim that essential work designations serve to identify the types of labour essential for meeting societal needs.

Crucially, during the neoliberal phase of capitalism in the 1980s, social reproduction was reshaped by processes of fragmentation, reprivatization and financialization. Fragmentation, which refers to the erosion of activities that sustain social reproduction (Cousins et al., 2018), is a process particularly relevant to the Global South, though not exclusively. A shortage of jobs providing decent and regular wages compels individuals to juggle multiple forms of unpaid and paid work, often informal and precarious. This situation exposes the fictitious distinction between capitalist production and social reproduction (Bernstein, 2010; Mezzadri, 2019; Naidu, 2023). While access to land remains a necessary but insufficient condition for social reproduction in agrarian contexts (Ossome and Naidu, 2021), the liberalization of agriculture, alongside the expansion of extractivism, has created conditions fostering food insecurity and a general precarity of life, with a distinct gendered character (Çelik 2023a, 2023b). Furthermore, while social reproduction remains centred around the family, the conditions of provisioning have changed. An important dimension of the fragmented conditions of provisioning is migration, whether within or beyond national borders, which has fragmented the spaces and times of social reproduction. By eroding social networks and breaking up families, for example, it has complicated the ability of families to meet their social reproduction needs (Kunz, 2010; Stevano, 2022).

Another important neoliberal process is the reprivatization of social reproduction, which refers to the shift of responsibility for social reproduction from the state back onto households (Bakker and Gill, 2003) in contexts where the state had temporarily assumed some social reproduction responsibilities through the creation of a welfare state. With the withdrawal of the state, families once more become primary welfare providers. However, this occurs in the context of growing capital encroachment on social reproduction and increasingly atomized societies (Bakker, 2007). In other words, social reproduction has been partly reprivatized and partly commodified, exacerbating inequalities between those who can afford to pay for social reproduction tasks and those who have to extend their working hours and jeopardize their well-being to support their families. Commodification has often been accompanied or followed by financialization in two main ways. First, social reproductive sectors have become new frontiers for the expansion of financial capital, especially in sectors such as health and social care, water and other utilities, resulting in deteriorating working conditions in these sectors (Bayliss and Gideon, 2020; Dowling, 2022). Second, growing household indebtedness has facilitated the emergence of privatized welfare provisioning (Roberts, 2016). Within this

context, the work of social reproduction has become increasingly difficult to perform and is a bearer of class, gender and race inequalities in society.

Finally, much essential work is categorized as unskilled or low-skilled (Farris and Bergfeld, 2022; Stevano et al., 2021b). Skill is largely defined by the level and/or type of formal education workers have obtained (Farris and Bergfeld, 2022). An assessment of essential work drawing on a body of feminist literature has shown that feminized occupations are deemed low-skilled because the social intelligence, emotional labour and forms of knowledge acquired through non-formal education are not recognized (Stevano, Ali and Jamieson, 2021b). In addition, there is evidence of de-skilling associated with the recruitment of specific social groups — often women and migrants — who are offered jobs below their skill levels due to gender and racial discrimination (*ibid.*). Technological progress has further contributed to the polarization of skill, resulting in the low-skill economy becoming increasingly feminized and racialized (Farris and Bergfeld, 2022). The socially constructed notion of skill deepens the divide between manual and non-manual work (*ibid.*), contributing to the devaluation of many forms of (social reproductive) manual work. This feeds into narratives that downplay the importance of manual labour in the future of work.

Although discussed only briefly, these systemic processes offer an explanation for the structural devaluation of certain forms of work. It is important to note that social reproduction work and essential work are not identical, although there is significant overlap, especially in the sectors of food, health, cleaning and sanitation and some parts of transportation as a form of basic infrastructure (as also recognized by Farris and Bergfeld, 2022). Devaluation arises not just from the widespread underpayment or non-payment of social reproduction, but fundamentally stems from the structural hierarchies of work and non-work, the deterioration of working conditions due to fragmentation and financialization and the socially constructed notion of skill. As a result, our confusion about the types of work that generate value and those that should be esteemed by society becomes evident when considering essential work. To address this uncertainty, a structural understanding of processes of work devaluation is needed, in addition to a critical re-engagement with debates on what constitutes ‘value’ in the contemporary economy, not least from a feminist social reproduction lens. This should be accompanied by intense political efforts to shift narratives and improve material conditions for the work crucial to the reproduction of life.

CONCLUSION

In recentring the discussion on the societal recognition of essential work as important and its paradoxical undervaluation, the 2023 ILO flagship report makes a significant intervention that sheds light on a fundamental problem in contemporary capitalism. This Assessment has identified two

key contributions of the report: its provision of a wealth of systematically derived, case-specific data on the poor working conditions of essential workers before and during the COVID-19 pandemic; and its emphasis of the dissonant relationship between the poor working conditions faced by key workers and the essential contribution this group of workers make to society. However, upon critically engaging with the report, some fundamental shortcomings also emerge. First, the report does not recognize the contested nature of essential work, especially how it was defined and deployed by governments during the COVID-19 pandemic. Second, the report fails to offer any explanation as to why essential work is systematically devalued in contemporary societies. In an attempt to answer this question, albeit partially, this article has emphasized mechanisms of unequal exchange in the global economy, the concentration of marginalized socio-economic groups in essential occupations, as well as the systemic devaluation of social reproduction work, which overlap and present parallels with essential work in contemporary capitalism. These factors and processes should be considered key elements for a structural understanding of the devaluation of essential labour. Finally, this article shows that at the core of these issues lies a reductionist, or more likely misleading, understanding of value.

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