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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Rethinking Family as a Care Justice Strategy

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The assumption that family ties devalue caring by making it "women's work" is commonplace. However, it is deeply problematic for three reasons: care is more than work; both material and immaterial goods are given value through institutional and interpersonal choices; and "family" is not only done in a patriarchal fashion. Each of these limitations can be overcome if giving and receiving care are valued; if so, a just society will be a caring one.

Care Is More Than Work

Recognizing that care is more than work does not deny feminist theorists' bountiful credit for the discovery of care work as a concept. Indeed, providing care for human beings, but also for the earth and the other species with whom we inhabit it, demands real physical labor as well as attention, time, and emotional engagement. Step one was to recognize that care work is real, financially uncompensated, and often emotionally demanding, especially of women, by others who hold power over them (Oakley 1974). In step two, specific efforts were made to name this exploitation and to demand a greater level of fairness in how it is distributed and valued. The "Wages for Housework" movements that developed in Europe following Sylvia Federici's (1975) influential essay helped realize this. The third step was a multinational feminist push on state social policy to offer greater economic support for familial care work, especially for investments in childrearing (Daly and Lewis 2000).

In the ensuing years, this vibrant field of policy studies has expanded to recognize care work for other recipients (especially elderly or disabled family members) and in more commodified contexts, be they childcare centers, hospitals, or facilities for the aged (see review in Ciccia 2025). Trade-offs between paying women for their familial caregiving and subsidizing the substitution of

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non-familial care institutions are recognized as offering more choices and different mixes of costs to both welfare states and individual carers (Glenn 2010).

Importantly, feminist researchers have made the focus more intersectional as well, pointing to women of color being assigned the types of care work that are the most labor-intensive and dirtiest (Glenn 1992). Another thread highlights the super-exploitation that results from the global care-chain transferring locally needed labor from poorer countries to meet the care needs of the more affluent (Parreñas 2001b). Power relations additional to gender assign care work unjustly and harm recipients as well as providers (Roberts 2002).

But still common to much care research is a tight focus on care only as *work*, and the paucity of economic rewards it offers when viewed through the lens of commodification (Folbre and Nelson 2000). This stratification-centered approach helps explain the glacial rate of progress in bringing men into care work. The balance of economic rewards between care work and market achievement makes care the more costly choice for men and well-educated women, leaving other women to pay the market penalty imposed on it (Goñalons-Pons 2015). The continuing mal-distribution of care work thus limits overall progress toward gender equality (England 2010).

This encourages equating family ties with exploitation rather than building common goods. Care as "unpaid labor" is real and far too omnipresent and valuable to be paid for at market rates, but "being there" for those for whom one cares also invokes a politics of obligation and responsiveness to need that is arguably at odds with the measured labor time of capitalist employment (Becker-Schmidt 1982). Even if societies could afford commodification of care for all those in need of care — infants, the elderly, the ill, the drug dependent, indeed, all of us — the idea of *only* doing "care" for which one could be paid remains unattractive (Folbre and Nelson 2000). Giving and receiving care is how people form communities of reciprocal respect, interdependency, and emotional development (Glenn 2010). The narrowing of our lens on care to its commodifiable aspects spurs many — not only on the political right — to defend family caring and family obligations as moral values (Levitsky 2014; Walker 2006).

Immaterial Aspects of Care

Moral language captures some of this immaterial value of care. Even when the distribution of caring is unequal, care is also a way of being human: the opposite of pure individualism, the manifestation of solidarity with others whom we value, the expression of relationships that make us who we are and who we aspire to be. Even those subject to high levels of exploitation of their care work, like many women of color in the care chain, are still deeply enmeshed in care not just as labor, but as family and community building in the face of adversity (Fullerton Rico 2024; Parreñas, 2001a). Women of color resisted the early white feminist assumption that families and caregiving were "unfree" and paid employment was "freeing" them (Davis 1981; Glenn 2010), and still often extend their caring to their whole community, saying they are "lifting as we climb" (Naples 1998).

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Care, not just care work, is political — not only through the justice or injustice in its provision, but in the ongoing process of creating the solidarity and community across lines of difference that defines a caring society. Though the right to choose to relate as family to another is constructed by the political economy and the nation-state, the power to do so remains an exercise of human agency. If the obligation to others is fundamental to the concept of care, such felt obligations are intrinsically political emotions. They may be found in, but are never limited to, ideal-typical patriarchal family ties. This would not be a radical thought to many social theorists interested in the conditions of class solidarity or the strategies of dehumanization that withdraw the moral obligation to care for those thus excluded. Nor is it an alien thought to the activists in Minnesota who stepped up in the winter of 2025–2026 to provide care for neighbors under attack from the Trump regime. Feminists like Walker (2006) and Folbre and Nelson (2000) resist seeing love and money as necessarily at odds by emphasizing how paid care work also carries this non-transactional meaning, expressing more than a market exchange. But when that meaning is one of familial obligation, the feminist focus returns to exploitation. The conviction that non-market care work today is necessarily unjust because families create a sense of obligation rests on the mistaken assumption that family has to be a patriarchal construct.

Today, this reflects a misapprehension of "family" as the male-breadwinner ideal-typical case and understanding free choice in liberal terms that bracket the contexts of choosing. Thinking of family as the primary institution for reproducing humanity should widen our lens to ask what human-ness is. Recognizing care as a humanizing relationship as well as a commodifiable form of labor would enhance a more complex understanding of family. Moreover, as observation of the resistance movement in Minnesota shows, activists doing unpaid physical care work for vulnerable others can also enrich our understanding of politics. The moral obligation to provide care that animated local volunteers delivering groceries explicitly contested the violent politics of "othering" aimed at breaking family and community ties.

Beyond the Patriarchal Family

The now-conventional nuclear, male breadwinner family certainly has served to produce and exploit inequality in gender relations in liberal democracies. But to ever call this "the traditional family" is outrageously ahistorical. Male authority in wage-dependent, husband-wife couples operates quite differently than in classical patriarchal relations, where fathers ruled by fiat (Ferree 2021; Pateman 1988). The transfer of national power from fathers/autocrats to men acting together in the liberal state's new legislatures, executives, corporations, unions, and civic groups changed all existing social institutions, including "the family." Men's monopoly of "public" economic and political power was part of creating a new "private" sphere, making it women's new job to make families "a haven in the heartless world" of capitalism (Lasch 1995).

Although glorifying maternal virtue and allowing women new forms of authority in the newly privatized family, liberal democracies also allowed women to win

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increasing degrees of public power. The gender relations of this modified patriarchy are familiar objects of critique, yet feminists rarely bristle when hearing them mis-described as the "traditional" family with "traditional" gender roles. Reading a Bible or the Koran will reveal truly patriarchal familial relationships — few of them monogamous, none of them nuclear. Although patriarchal exploitation infuses these texts, there is no sign of the peculiar, industrial capitalist notion of "breadwinning" as a specific form of male entitlement in husband-wife couples or a segregation of "caring" into one gender category (Ferree 2020).

Resisting calling complementary family roles "traditional" points instead to how family is a historically shape-shifting institution that creates and justifies diverse, emotionally laden obligations. Multiple generations of economic change and political struggle have transformed families as well as states and economies (Esping-Anderson and Billari 2015; Walby 2009). The dismantling of legal barriers to women's education and employment brought resources to women that changed their imagined life course. Technological advances in contraception and medically assisted pregnancy have empowered women to choose marriage and/or children at different life stages. The families that 21st-century people choose are already characterized by a diversity beyond gender binary husband-wife roles. The demography of the 21st century is one of a transnational citizenry with education rather than land as wealth-generating and "blended families" offering care of all kinds to biological and non-biologically related children born with more or less medical assistance (Ferree 2021; Esping-Anderson and Billari 2015).

As political struggles pushed democracies to no longer divide legal obligations to provide economic support and emotional care onto a gender binary, the path to recognizing same-sex marriages was opened. New opportunities for heterosexual "serial monogamy" for those less invested in meeting care needs for the children of earlier unions also opened different choices to men (Ehrenreich 1987). Immigration as well as sexual innovation challenged former denunciations of polygyny as inherently part of classical patriarchy and thus profoundly "unmodern" (Heath 2023).

As biology became less determinative, the relation between care and gender was renegotiated institutionally. "Choice" is being re-imagined not as simply private preferences but socially conditioned commitments to care. Having sexual relations might or might not presuppose forming more or less durable unions ("partnerships" or "families by choice"). Having children (or not) means making decisions about what kind of life you seek. And if children are born, marriage is less necessary for their economic survival. Contemporary family politics demonstrate that "public" and "private" are not really separate spheres, let alone oppositional categories.

Conclusions

In sum, care is not just work, paid or unpaid as it may be, but also a chosen relationship of intimacy and connection among individuals who may or may not be counted as family by the state. LGBTQ+ relationships, transnational family-based migration, and increases in longevity and decreases in fertility are ongoing challenges to the patriarchal family stereotype. As marriage rights have expanded

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legally and the state benefits of being recognized as being a family remain substantial, how might feminists rethink family as an institution (Ramirez Garcia 2024)?

While changes in the political economy and nation state put pressure on families, the direction of the effects is unclear. The manifold responsibilities of caring — material support, physical labor, and emotional connection — are often defined normatively as familial. But as the institutional boundaries of family change, so do the capacities of familial ties to carry such multifaceted relationships across space and time. For example, reconsidering transnational families from the standpoint of caregiving and care-receiving members struggling against immigration restrictions adds "family reunification" to the problematics of care for policy-making (Longo 2018; 2023).

Expanding our understanding of family to stress both constraint and human agency allows "chosen families" to illuminate the value of non-commodifiable caring (Ramirez Garcia 2024). A caring society that joined significant economic redistribution to the cultivation of solidarity through a wider understanding of family feeling would challenge not just sex and gender binaries but also racial exclusivity. Knowing who cares for "us" and deciding for whom we care may develop first in family relations but extends to all politics. Sweden's generous welfare state was justified from the start with imagining the country as "the people's home," yet as immigration triggered contemporary "welfare nationalism" in this and other previously more homogenous states, understanding family as defining "people for whom we care" exposes the close relationship between family and nation (Schall 2016). Violent anti-immigrant politics appear to awaken commitments to mutual aid and community defense.

Addressing care as a feeling structure, as well as an economic one, allows for more trenchant feminist critique of masculinities as varying in their ability to care (Connell and Messerschmidt 2005). If care is only thought of as work, men have advantages in "not caring," but widening gendered care relations to include intimacy with and obligations to others may reveal how men may be losing out, too. The "deaths of despair" disproportionately experienced by men who have lost the breadwinner rationale for giving and getting care through family and community connections are a material manifestation of such toxicity (Case and Deaton 2020). Strategically approaching care as reflecting "family feeling" not limited by conventional ideas of heteronormative, monogamous, and autonomous family structures could expand consideration of family-building work as essential to human flourishing, to environmental protection, and to gender-fair, economically resilient communities.

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