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To cite this article: Rhacel Salazar Parreñas, Sabrina Marchetti & Wasana Handapangoda (2026) Care economies: States, markets and inequalities, *Economy and Society*, 55:2, 211-231, DOI: [10.1080/03085147.2026.2631327](https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2026.2631327)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/03085147.2026.2631327>



Published online: 17 Apr 2026.



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Care economies: States, markets and inequalities

Rhacel Salazar Parreñas , Sabrina Marchetti  and Wasana Handapangoda

Abstract

This special issue engages with the concept of ‘care economies’, broadly defined by sociologist Ito Peng (2019) as the economic sector concerned with caring for and nurturing present and future populations. This special issue challenges the tendency in the literature to reduce care to informal household labour by drawing attention to the ways in which care is increasingly commodified, formalized and regulated. By examining care economies both inside and outside the home, the special issue explores various organizational and market arrangements of commodified care; investigates how states, markets and civil society intersect to shape these economic configurations; analyses the ideological frameworks that underpin care’s commodification; and identifies care-related inequalities across social relations (e.g. between employers and employees), households and nations.

Keywords: care; care economies; domestic work; reproductive labour; migration.

Care is a basic precondition for life and social coexistence. It refers to the labour of looking after the well-being of others. This type of labour is split by gender, the public and private sphere, non-profit and for-profit institutions, and the formal and informal market (England, 2005; Folbre, 2002). Care is both paid and unpaid labour. As unpaid labour, it is socially valued while relegated as women’s work in the family. As paid labour, it occupies both the unregulated informal sector and the regulated formal sector. While valued spiritually and

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emotionally, it remains undervalued economically (Folbre, 2006; Glenn, 1992) and thereby becomes invisible (Folbre, 2002) and left unrecognized, for example, scarcely accounted for in national account systems (Peng, 2019). Care entails both nurturant and non-nurturant work; it involves the nurturant work of feeding babies but also the non-nurturant work of cleaning floors (Duffy, 2011). It includes the labour of nannies, elderly care providers, companions, therapists, nurses and among others, teachers (Aulenbacher *et al.*, 2018; Duffy & Armenia, 2021).

Studies on the work of providing care have historically focused on the private sphere, either examining the gender division of work in the family (Budig & England, 2001; Rao, 2020) or the precarity of paid elderly and childcare in households (Hondagneu-Sotelo, 2001; Lutz, 2011; Parreñas, 2015; Romero, 2002). With few exceptions (see Parreñas, 2000), studies have tended to emphasize relationships within the household, rather than examining the market processes that lead to the placement of workers in this setting. Consequently, there has been less focus on processes that lead to the formalization of care markets (Farris & Marchetti, 2017). Under late capitalism, the increasing commodification of care has enabled markets to determine who enters the household as a domestic worker, while also expanding care labour into the formal sector. This shift has moved historically unpaid or informal care work – once confined to private households – into paid roles both within homes and in institutional settings. This shift has significant implications to our understanding of care as it pushes us to acknowledge the expansion of care economies from the informal to the formal market and the concomitant rise of different labour and market arrangements. This expansion, which is what this special issue highlights, invites the examination of variations in market arrangements and organizations; the penetration of markets into households; the inequalities constituted in economic exchanges of care; competing cultural regimes of care as paid and unpaid as well as formal and informal labour; and state, market and civil society interactions in the regulation of care work.

This special issue first illustrates the emergence of diverse economic arrangements and organizations of care under late capitalism, including households' use of for-profit and non-profit brokers (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026; Handapangoda, 2026; Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026). It analyses these arrangements by identifying those that support the recognition of labour rights – such as the bottom-up formation of worker collectives and unionization (see Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026; Pandey, 2026) – as well as those that enable the evasion of such rights (see Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026; Katona & Gábel, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026). The special issue also addresses the corporatization of care by demonstrating how market economies have expanded to encompass sectors such as education (Ortiga, 2026).

Second, it highlights different scales of care inequalities across social relations, households, race, class and nations. A pointed theme concerning inequalities that tie all the papers together is the increasing reliance of households on migrant labour across the globe including in the Americas, Asia and

Europe and the limited rights the state extends to these workers. Papers examine inequalities by looking at the interstices of markets and states, addressing how marketization can alienate care providers (Handapangoda, 2026; Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026; Ortiga, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026), how markets and states collude (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026; Handapangoda, 2026; Katona & Gábel, 2026), how markets elude state regulation (Katona & Gábel, 2026); and how civil society can diffuse inequalities and empower workers (Katona & Gábel, 2026; Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026; Pandey, 2026).

Third, this special issue explores the cultural and social transformations brought about by the marketization of care. It considers how enduring perceptions of care as a private household concern undermine families' ability to rely on commodified care (Katona & Gábel, 2026). It also demonstrates how these perceptions hinder the recognition of reproductive labour, thereby limiting its legitimate marketization (Pandey, 2026).

Historical perspectives on care economies: The commodification of housework

Ito Peng (2019, p. 2) defines the care economy as 'the sector of economic activities, both paid and unpaid, related to the provisions of social and material care, which contribute to nurturing and supporting the present and future populations'. It is a rapidly expanding sector that encompasses both care work, defined by Paula England and Nancy Folbre (1999) as the face-to-face labour of developing the capabilities of another person, and reproductive work, what Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992, p. 1) considers 'the array of activities and relationships involved in maintaining people both on a daily basis and intergenerationally'. Reproductive work is more expansive than care work as it is not limited to face-to-face interactions but instead includes 'activities such as purchasing household goods, preparing and serving food, laundering and repairing clothing, maintaining furnishings and appliances, socializing children, providing care and emotional support for adults, and maintaining kin and community ties' (Glenn, 1992, p. 1). In other words, it includes what Mignon Duffy (2011) distinguishes as the non-nurturant work required in the maintenance of households.

The literature on care economies emerged as early as the late 1800s with the publication in 1884 of Friedrich Engels' seminal book *The origin of the family, private property, and the state*. Examining the implications of the industrial revolution to the family, Engels (2010 [1884]) explains how capitalism is contingent on the devaluation of women's household work. Prior to the industrial revolution of the nineteenth century, both men and women participated in the family economy and contributed jointly to work in the home. The industrial revolution transformed this division of labour as the demand for factory work meant the employment of men outside the home and the subsequent relegation of women inside the home (Harris, 1983; Mintz, 1989). This led to a distinction

between what Engels refers to as productive and reproductive labour with the former referring to work that creates profit through the production of commodities for the capitalist market and the latter referring to activities (often inside the home or outside of economic exchanges) that are necessary for the maintenance of the workforce. As an economic system, capitalism, according to Engels (2010 [1884]), relies on the devaluation of reproductive work, to enable the conditions that would free men to participate in public industries.

Building on Engels' analysis, Maria Mies (1986) insists that the assignment of reproductive labour to women was not an organic occurrence but rather a violent process. Primitive accumulation, according to Mies (1986) includes the control of women's bodies, the brutal persecution and killing of those who managed reproductive knowledge – such as midwives and witches – and the disciplining of those with financial independence from men. Mies (1986) contends that this violence persists in global forms today. She offers the concept of the sexual division of labour, theorizing it as a core structuring principle of capitalism itself. According to Mies (1986), women's unpaid domestic and reproductive labour – both in the household and in subsistence economies – serves as a hidden but essential foundation for capitalist accumulation. Placing this analysis within a global framework, she highlights how the exploitation of women's labour is not only gendered but also racialized and colonial: the capitalist system relies on the low-wage labour of women of colour and women from formerly colonized regions, while middle- and upper-class women – particularly in the Global North – are subjugated through confinement to the domestic sphere. In this way, capitalism reproduces global hierarchies through both the devaluation of feminized labour and the differentiated roles assigned to women across racial and class lines.

By explaining how women's work in the home represents 'domestic slavery', Engels (2010 [1884]) provided an analytic foundation for understanding the economic significance of housework to capitalism – a framework that Mies (1986) further develops by emphasizing the global and colonial dimensions of this exploitation. It is also a framework used by key works that pioneered our understanding of care economies, including, as we discuss in this section, Silvia Federici's (1975) discussion of wages for housework, Evelyn Nakano Glenn's formulation of the racial division of reproductive labour, and Rhacel Parreñas' (2000) subsequent expansion of Glenn with the concept of the international division of reproductive labour. Together, these works foreground the unequal exchanges in care economies.

In 1975, feminist Silvia Federici built on Engels to argue for 'wages for housework'. She calls attention to the adversities wrought on women by the capitalist system's dependence on their unpaid labour. Housework, as essential labour designated to women, is work they can neither resist nor reject. As she argues, 'the unwaged condition of housework has been the most powerful weapon in reinforcing the common assumption that housework is not work, thus preventing women from struggling against it' (Federici, 1975, p. 2). Housework as essential labour leaves women in a catch-22 position as it is

work that they must do albeit without remuneration. According to Federici (1975), this undervaluation operates to the benefit of capitalism and leaves women in a position of economic and social dependence on men. It is on this basis that she advocates the introduction of ‘wages for housework’.

Expanding on Federici (1975), feminists then began to interrogate what happens if women enter the workforce. Inequalities of housework, they found, extend to determine women’s productive labour opportunities (Budig & England, 2001; Hartmann, 1981). They not only delimit productive labour opportunities for women to labour that agrees with their reproductive responsibilities at home (Hartmann, 1976), but they also limit the rewards of this labour to be less than those of men (Budig & England, 2001; Hartmann, 1981). This in turn aggravates inequalities of housework (Hochschild & Machung, 1989) between men and women and at the same time creates reproductive labour inequalities among women. In more severe circumstances, this imbalance can result in ‘depletion’, as unequal reproductive labour places a heavy strain on those who carry the bulk of it (Rai, 2024).

According to sociologist Evelyn Nakano Glenn (1992), reproductive labour is not only divided by gender but also racial lines. Racial hierarchies of reproductive labour reflect the labour market incorporation of working-class women of colour. In the early twentieth century, they were concentrated in domestic work and relegated to performing the ‘dirty’ reproductive labour in middle class, and usually white, households (Palmer, 1989). Women’s entry to the labour market in the late twentieth century then expanded the scope of their reproductive labour to include work outside the household, where they were concentrated in ‘lower-level “public” reproductive labour’ (Glenn, 1992, p. 3) doing ‘heavy, dirty, “back-room” chores of cooking and serving food in restaurants and cafeterias, cleaning rooms in hotels and office buildings, and caring for the elderly and ill in hospitals and nursing homes, including cleaning rooms, making beds, changing bed pans, and preparing food’ (Glenn, 1992, p. 20).

Racial and class inequalities of reproductive labour extend to a global scale. Situating the racialized division of reproductive labour within the global economy, Parreñas (2000) challenges dominant understandings of international economic exchanges by showing that what is traded between nations is not only commodities or financial capital but also care. Extending Saskia Sassen’s (1984) analysis of global cities – which revealed how financial centres depend on a migrant underclass for low-wage service work – Parreñas (2000) turns attention to the maintenance of households and kinship networks, revealing a global care commodity chain. Through the concept of the ‘international division of reproductive labour’, she theorizes a three-tiered transnational transfer of reproductive responsibilities: (1) middle-class women in host countries outsource care work to, (2) migrant domestic workers, who, in turn, rely on, and (3) poorer women in their countries of origin – including unpaid family members – to care for their own children and households. This structure exposes a global

exchange system in which reproductive labour, like material goods, is transferred and extracted across borders along lines of race, gender and class.

Parreñas (2000) re-centres reproductive labour as a critical site of value production within global capitalism, showing that the exploitation underpinning global economic relations is not confined to factories or financial systems but deeply embedded in households and care economies. Her work extends the sexual division of labour theorized by Mies (1986) by illuminating how reproductive labour has been internationalized, and how women's unpaid or underpaid care work sustains the functioning of capitalist economies in both sending and receiving countries. In this way, the global economy is not only structured through unequal exchanges of commodities and capital, but also through asymmetrical flows of care, where emotional labour and social reproduction are unevenly distributed across national and class boundaries.

The formation of the international division of reproductive labour, notably renamed by Hochschild (2000) as the global care chains, suggest that reproductive activities, as they have been increasingly commodified, must be viewed in the context of the global market economy (Parreñas, 2000; also see Isaksen *et al.*, 2008; Lutz, 2018; Marchetti, 2022). This global division of reproductive labour is a structural process that determines migration and (uneven) global redistribution, where certain groups (e.g. immigrant women, local women of colour) are relegated to precarious and economically and culturally undervalued work. It points to issues of gender and intersectional effects, mobility and transnationalization of families, labour and markets (Palenga-Möllenberg, 2025). The international division of reproductive labour highlights the mobilization of 'women's work' through formal and informal, paid and unpaid market arrangements, and the global, social and economic interdependencies among women within the political economy of care (Peng, 2019). Indeed, multiple papers in this special issue establish the reliance on migrant care workers of households including in Spain (Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026), United States (Pandey, 2026), Czechia (Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026); Hungary (Katona & Gábor, 2026), Kuwait (Handapangoda, 2026) and Germany (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026).

While the foundational works by Mies, Glenn and Parreñas successfully situate care and reproductive labour within the broader global economy, scholarship on reproductive labour remains analytically anchored in the domain of the household (Ortiga, 2026). There is limited engagement with forms of reproductive labour that occur beyond the private sphere of the home (Rai, 2024). Indeed, works that have engaged the international division of reproductive labour retreat to the view of housework as unpaid work in the family (Baldassar & Merla, 2014). Adding to discussions on the outsourcing of care, Baldassar and Merla (2014) introduced the concept of 'care circulation', which points to the reciprocal, multidirectional and uneven exchange of care across borders and within families (also see Merla, 2025). In this formulation, care remains a private household matter. While this concept moves beyond the condition of physical proximity in care provision, it insufficiently recognizes its

increased commodification and the constitution of power in the exchange. The seminal work of Glenn (1992) on inequalities of reproduction in the labour market has generally not been extended or is even ignored by those critiquing the concentration of care work analysis on housework (Yeates, 2012).

This special issue on care economies analyses market exchanges inside and outside the household. It asks: What are ideological views of care and how do such views shape the expansion of care to the public sphere? What are the market arrangements of care? How do the state and civil society shape these arrangements? What forms of inequality – old and new – are constituted and created in care economies? So as to expand the nascent concept of ‘care economies’, papers in this special issue begin to address these questions, as they illustrate and examine the emergence of quasi-markets (Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026) and neoliberal markets (Katona & Gábel, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026); the role not just of the state (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026) but also civil society (Pandey, 2026); the impact of institutional intermediaries (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026; Handapangoda, 2026; Katona & Gábel, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026), and the intersections of care, religion (Katona & Gábel, 2026) and educational markets (Ortiga, 2026).

Contemporary perspectives on care economies: Beyond housework

Care work is fundamental to the economy and the ‘ability of money to mobilize labour power for “productive work”’ (Elson, 2025, p. 8). At the same time, care work is not only a form of reproductive labour which sustains the productive labour force but also a unit of exchange in capitalism. Care is now acknowledged as a resource that is produced and exchanged as a commodity that accordingly creates opportunities as well as inequalities in the global economy (Parreñas, 2000). As a commodity, care has become a key resource for economic growth in an increasing number of migrant source countries (Handapangoda, 2026; Katona & Gábel, 2026; Ortiga, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026).

The rising demand for care is prompted by a global crisis. Reproductive and care labour demands for families are increasing due not only to the labour market participation of women but also neoliberal state retrenchment of in-kind provisions and aging populations (Chen *et al.*, 2021). The ideological view of childcare as a private household responsibility of women still troubles women entering the labour market (Budig & England, 2001; Folbre, 2006; Katona & Gábel, 2026; Rao, 2020). With the rise in women’s employment, it has, however, been impossible to keep care work inside the home.¹ For this reason, care work is now accepted as not just belonging in the private but also in the public domain. This special issue extends the literature from its primary focus on the household to include in its analysis of care economies institutions other than the family (e.g. health, education, finance and labour). Its examination of care features three themes: markets, regulation and lastly

inequalities. It first examines the marketization of care including its expansion from the private to the public sphere; its changing arrangements; and the social and cultural transformations it engenders. It then examines how state regulation and civil society shape care economies. Finally, it analyses the inequalities of race, class and gender constituted in the commodification and marketization of care.

Far-reaching societal transformations over recent decades have brought about significant rearrangements in the institutional architecture of care and reproduction. The market has increasingly become a dominant force in care provision, while the state and the family/household – though still central – are also outsourcing care responsibilities in both the Global North and the Global South. In the context of fiscal pressures, the global financial crisis (2008–2012), and the resultant processes of neoliberal restructuring worldwide, governments in traditional welfare states in the Global North have imposed austerity measures and, in some cases, significantly withdrawn institutional care provisions (see Katona & Gábel, 2026; Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026). Meanwhile, states with historically limited welfare systems (e.g. the United States) have continued to treat care as a private household responsibility (see Pandey, 2026). This global shift has led to the rise of profitable care markets: care and reproductive labour are now ‘on the market’ as never before. Marking a move away from family- or non-profit-based provisions, institutionalized welfare states have embraced quasi-market models of public care provision grounded in market logics. In some cases, regulated and subsidized services have been replaced by cash allowances, opening the door to new – and often precarious – care arrangements (Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026), while others have adopted more severe austerity approaches (Katona & Gábel, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026).

The contributions to this special issue show that despite these formalizing and market-driven trends, families continue to rely significantly on informal paid care and reproductive work within the household (Handapangoda, 2026; Katona & Gábel, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026). This informality coexists with broader efforts to formalize care labour through unionization and worker collectives (Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026; Pandey, 2026), professionalization (Ortiga, 2026), and corporatization (Handapangoda, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026). The current reconfiguration of care – mediated through a variety of policy frameworks and institutional schemas – underscores the diversity of market-led institutional arrangements. The concept of a ‘typology of care marketisation’, introduced by Farris and Marchetti (2017), offers a comprehensive and innovative framework for understanding these developments in an increasingly marketized public arena. As described by Farris and Marchetti (2017), the ongoing reconfigurations of care work are led not just by processes of commodification and marketization, but also by complex mechanisms of corporatization. Farris and Marchetti (2017) see such a historical shift as due not only to the rising demand for both elderly care and

childcare, but also as the result of state policies that promote the proliferation of private actors to contain public costs associated with care needs.

Care work, in the overarching transition from unpaid labour provided typically by women within private households to paid labour carried out in the market, is undergoing a transformation from a commodified model of care to marketized and finally corporatized types (although not necessarily in the same linear order or under conditions where the forms of care provision captured by these concepts remain fixed) (Farris and Marchetti, 2017; Ungerson, 1997). While the commodification or marketization of care captures the processes by which care as unpaid labour and as a use value has gradually been transformed into a commodity subject to market logic, the corporatization of care describes the ways in which for-profit actors are increasingly entering the world of care and imposing business rationalities and the corporate logic of profit-maximization on the whole sector. In their analysis they put emphasis on the role of the state in ensuring the functioning of markets, and on the metamorphosis through which citizens become ‘care consumers’, individually responsible for the care they ‘buy’ (Farris and Marchetti, 2017). Other scholars have elaborated on this dynamic, demonstrating how class and racial inequalities make care affordable and profitable by relying on the low-paid labour of poor women of colour, often in facilities owned by co-ethnics who exploit them (Horton, 2022; Nazareno, 2018; Showers, 2023).

Farris and Marchetti (2017) illustrate this transformation via a typology which distinguishes three ‘care types’ – commodified, marketized and corporatized – to explain the different ways in which the provision and organization of care are subject to market and profit-making rules. In this development, it is central to understand the role of market and non-market actors, and the overlaps between for-profit and not-for-profit, especially due to transformations in the role of the state and the family. In all countries, the number of for-profit care providers has grown at a dramatic pace, particularly since the last decade. The more they enter the world of care, the more they impose business rationalities and profit-making logics, including a redefinition of the labour force based on notions of employability and professionalization.

Building on Farris and Marchetti (2017), paper in this special issue explore what care looks like across different market arrangements showing varying forms of state regulation, institutional arrangements and labour composition. The expansion of care markets and the subsequent diversification of care arrangements have not come seamlessly but instead have triggered cultural conflicts due to the clash in the view of care as belonging in either the public or private sphere. Consequently, there remains a limit to its recognition as labour (Katona & Gábel, 2026; Pandey, 2026). Due to the ideology of women’s domesticity (Parreñas, 2007), there is an assumption that care – meaning the labour of looking after the well-being of others and the economy – meaning, the production and exchange of resources, including goods and services – are antithetical to one another (Zelizer, 2005). Care is considered a private matter while the economy is a public matter. Care should be

guided by love and altruism which is in contradistinction to the supposed motivations of the economy: instrumentalism and money. Papers in this special issue pay attention to this tension in cultural meanings and how such tensions materialize in state regulation (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026; Pandey, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026) or in the lack of it (Katona & Gábel, 2026).

The imagery of care work (particularly in Europe [World Economic Forum, 2021]) is changing: care work is no longer considered exclusively women's housework that rests upon the sexual division of labour. However, there is a certain degree of ideological stability to this across different socio-spatial settings (Parreñas, 2007). We see this in the countercultural movement of the 'tradwife', an image that contests the increasing labour market participation of women. 'Tradwife', a neologism for traditional wife, is one who abides by traditional gender roles and marriage. Seeing homemaking and income earning as mutually exclusive practices, a 'tradwife' chooses the former over the latter. This 'cult of domesticity' (Welter, 1966) or the ideology of women's domesticity haunts the rising demand for care and reproductive workers. It stunts the economic value of care work as it stigmatizes the women who choose to outsource this work to other women (McDonald, 2011). This devaluation is why it is considered an elementary occupation (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026) or one that can remain unregulated (Katona & Gábel, 2026).

This special issue, for its final theme, interrogates how states, markets and civil society intersect in the provision of care and reproductive labour. It interrogates the political and social determinations of the exchange of care as a commodified and produced resource in the global economy. It unpacks what Razavi (2007) calls a 'care diamond',² meaning the intersections of the state, market, household and not-for-profit sector in the institutional provision of care, to understand state efforts towards labour regulation (Aulenbacher *et al.*, 2020; Fish, 2017; Kofman & Raghuram 2009). It broadly interrogates state policies to establish the influence on institutional arrangements of migrant exclusion (Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026), household ideologies (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026; Katona & Gábel, 2026) and civil society (Pandey, 2026).

Rapidly changing configurations of care have confronted care scholars with new dilemmas and challenges that call for answers in all their complexity, momentum and fixity. Accordingly, this special issue aims to provide greater analysis of 'care economies' considering the connections and interactions between marketized care provision (the paid care economy) and non-marketized social reproduction (the unpaid care economy) against the backdrop of contemporary global care migrations. It attempts to provide a global perspective that accounts for care markets in Europe, America and Asia. In their discussion of the state, markets and inequalities, papers highlight the transformation of care arrangements in late capitalism to interrogate the continued devaluation of care. Overall, papers agree that (1) the configuration of care economies maintain the view of care as informal women's work or devalued

labour; (2) the rationalization prompted by care marketization competes against traditional views of care; and (3) inequalities of race and nation determine as they are aggravated by current care arrangements.

Regulation

Care work is a ‘fictitious commodity’ (Polanyi, 2001 [1944]) that was not inherently produced for the market (Aulenbacher & Leiblfinger, 2019). Through its commodification, care work, applying Polanyi, becomes caught between the forces of capitalism (that is the market) and social protection (that is the state). As a commodity, care work is subjected to politically and socially determined market forces that potentially invite social and economic problems but are then mitigated by state intervention. Polanyi (2001 [1944]) refers to this process as the ‘double movement’, that is the cyclical process of marketization and social protection. Papers in this special issue complicate the ‘double movement’ as they show that state intervention might not lead to the mitigation of inequalities created in marketization. It is because state intervention does not necessarily mitigate employer control and discretion. Rather than counteracting exploitation, states may enable it by creating legal loopholes, outsourcing regulation, or failing to enforce existing protections (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026; Katona & Gábel, 2026; Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026). These dynamics reveal that care economies are actively shaped by market interests and state complicity.

As Aulenbacher *et al.* (2020) acknowledge in their observations of care work in Austria, marketization can simultaneously formalize care work while at the same time foster precarious working arrangements. They show that self-employment, as a form of state-intervention towards regularization, is encouraged through the provision of social security but simultaneously discouraged, with the exclusion of workers from employee benefits, such as sick leave. While papers in this special issue build on Polanyi as well as philosopher Nancy Fraser’s (2017) addition of the third step in the ‘double movement’, what she calls the ‘triple movement’ of emancipation, an emphasis on gender shows how the ideological stronghold of the ‘cult of domesticity’ constrains the recognition of care work as labour and accordingly limits the social protections extended by the state.

Since the passage of International Labour Organization Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers in 2011, states have increasingly recognized care work as labour. This convention sought to establish universal standards of employment through a minimum wage and other forms of labour protection. Yet, many states still do not include domestic work in their regular labour laws (Marchetti *et al.*, 2021; Parreñas, 2015). In the case of migrant workers, most destination countries even limit the labour market participation of domestic workers by making them ineligible to seek other types of employment (e.g. Singapore and Kuwait) or by binding their legal residency to

an employer-sponsor (Handapangoda, 2026; Parreñas, 2015). This keeps the costs of reproductive labour low for households that depend on migrant domestic workers. State intervention is thereby not just there to offer protection, in the form of minimum wage or a mandatory day off, but to strengthen market forces by minimizing the reproductive costs of employers who depend on their labour.

In some contexts, the state and market collude by positioning the household as a space that should remain free from external interference. This is the case in Hungary (Katona & Gábríel, 2026), as well as in Czechia (Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026). In Hungary, the power of the church and an enduring ideological commitment to informality in care work inhibit state recognition and regulation. As a result, care is kept a private responsibility while the state facilitates transnational care chains: Hungarian women migrate to meet demand for elder care in Austria and Germany, leaving space for ethnic Hungarians from Romania and Ukraine to fill care gaps domestically. In Czechia, migrant care workers face what Uhde and Gheorghiev (2026) call ‘state-induced precarity’, as they are deskilled and redirected into low-wage care roles by the state’s refusal to recognize the human capital they bring.

Uhde and Gheorghiev (2026) offer a theoretical framework for understanding how the state’s systemic neglect renders care workers’ labour essential yet unrecognized. Extractivism, as a theoretical framework, offers a powerful lens to understand the alienated labour of migrant care workers in Czechia by highlighting how value is systematically appropriated from social reproduction under conditions of structural inequality. Traditionally associated with the appropriation of natural resources, extractivism in the context of care refers to the commodification and detachment of care from its relational, social and affective foundations, allowing it to be mined for value without reinvestment in the workers or communities that sustain it. In Czechia, this extractive logic manifests through a range of institutional and material processes: Migrant care workers are funneled into live-in arrangements via intermediaries, their skills are devalued through cross-border deskilling, and their labour is rendered hyper-precious by the state’s active role in shaping segmented and informal labour markets. Welfare policies that prioritize rapid labour market integration over social support, the absence of accessible housing, and regulatory regimes that tolerate informality in the name of flexibility all contribute to a system in which the state facilitates, rather than mitigates, the extraction of care. This framing shifts the focus from mere exploitation to a broader critique of how value is captured from care work through its alienation from the worker’s social and human context, making extractivism a crucial analytic for understanding the political economy of transnational care labour.

The state and market collusion in care work can largely be attributed to its stalled recognition as an occupation. This is akin to the stalled recognition of women as income contributors to the household (Gerson, 2010). This is not to say that regulation has not worked to the benefit of care workers (Fish, 2017). However, there remains a resistance to the full recognition of care

work, which is seen as marred by the competing interests of care receivers and providers and the moral dilemmas that this tension raises for rights advocates. This is illustrated by the case of a Bulgarian domestic worker in Germany who technically won her civil case and was awarded by the Berlin Regional Labour Court €32,029 after having worked for nearly two years as an elderly care worker and only compensated €950 per month for working 24 hours a day, seven days a week (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026). This ruling in her favour was merely a symbolic recognition that eventually did not materialize. The court did not find her elderly ward liable but only the insolvent Bulgarian agency that brokered her employment. At the end, the ruling upheld the sanctity of the household as an institution that should be free of outside forces, which one can argue is not necessarily a countermovement to a ‘double movement’ but instead a stall in state intervention in the commodification of care.

This outcome points to a second, equally entrenched structural issue: the fragmentation of legal responsibility across transnational actors. In an increasingly marketized care economy, accountability is dispersed among families, agencies and states, creating a ‘responsibility vacuum’ in which no actor ensures rights or redress. Rather than counterbalancing market forces, states often enable them – outsourcing risk to workers, promoting self-employment, and relying on for-profit agencies to manage care under the guise of flexibility and affordability. This paper shows how standardization is not achieved, but strategically eluded, through legal ambiguity, rotational labour and institutional disengagement (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026). In doing so, it adds nuance to our understanding of how states and markets collude in care governance and shows how they are deeply entangled in producing fragmented, insecure and exploitative systems.

Market arrangements

In late capitalism, as discussed earlier, the expansion of care work beyond private households has reassigned what was historically unpaid care work or informal work in the home to the formal sector (Farris & Marchetti, 2017). There are now diverse economic arrangements and organizations of care work. Making care a window to ‘new forms of capitalist restructuring’ (Farris & Marchetti, 2017, p. 127), this diversification is reflected in the emergence of privately owned care enterprises, quasi-care markets, not-for-profit care cooperatives and unions, private and semi-private care worker agencies, and private, semi-private and public care facilities.

These new arrangements have implications for work conditions. Care workers may be in a long-term informal live-in arrangement, or a live-out circular arrangement; they may be directly employed by private individuals or households, or through migration brokers or care platforms; they may be working for private individuals or households, or for long-term care facilities such as nursing homes, homes for the elderly, and paid for by private

individuals, families and/or the state. As different typologies of care marketization have resulted in different configurations of work arrangements, we need to ask: who can access care and who pays for care? What are the cultural configurations of care work? How does civil society as well as the state shape these configurations?

Prior research has shown that the rights of care workers can be compromised in the formalization of their labour (Parreñas, 2022; Ray & Quayum, 2007). For instance, the shift from traditional live-in employment may grant domestic workers autonomy but not necessarily security. This is illustrated in the case of India where the ‘culture of servitude’ in domestic work shifted from that of the dependent full-time live-in household servant to the independent part-time live-out household worker (Ray & Qayum, 2007). It is a shift that has resulted in the greater precarity of domestic workers as their independence eliminated the social contract in informal domestic work that previously provided them with security in old age. In the past, Indian households had a responsibility towards the well-being of domestic workers through retirement. Today, the more distant relationship in domestic work comes without retirement benefits due to the occupation’s continued lack of recognition.

As established by the passage of International Labour Organization Convention 189 on Decent Work for Domestic Workers, the legitimization of both care work and reproductive work comes from their inclusion in the formal ‘service sector’. Distancing is seen as a key measure towards this move from the informal to formal (Romero, 2002). Yet, formalization may unintentionally deny domestic workers their ability to use close relationships with employers as an informal tool for improving labour conditions. Pandey (2026) draws on ethnographic research with a domestic worker advocacy organization to explore the tensions that arise when efforts to formalize domestic labour as a standardized service job overlook how workers navigate, and at times strategically use, the affective and informal dimensions of their work (Boris & Nadasen, 2008; Fish, 2017). The author argues that to fully understand the complications of mobilizing workers engaged in intimate labour, it is essential to examine the overlapping discourses of economic value and emotional ties that shape the labour relationship.

Building on Viviana Zelizer’s (2000, 2005) concept of ‘connected lives’, Pandey (2026) shows how organizations oscillate between two often contradictory framings: invoking the ‘hostile worlds’ narrative to push for legal recognition and professional status, while also drawing on workers’ own narratives of emotional interdependence and moral worth to counter everyday devaluation. Global policy frameworks on ‘decent work’ and contractual norms are used to advocate for formal labour protections, yet these coexist with appeals to empathy, care and the essential nature of the work in campaigns directed at the public and potential allies. In doing so, the paper highlights how the push to professionalize domestic work remains a deeply contentious process, shaped by the need to reconcile formalization with the intimate realities of care labour.

This tension undergirds discussions in other papers (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026; Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026). Contradictions have emerged in the

corporatization of care including in the logic of its provision. As care is corporatized, how do we resolve the moral commitment expected in care work and the profit commitment of business rationalities? As care is marketized, how do we resolve the tensions between the simultaneous want for formal standardization and informal flexibility in its management? One theme tying the papers concern tensions between formal and informal care work. In late capitalism, a heightened culture of corporatization denies personal relations in care work. This emerges in the increasing use of digital platforms that make care more of a fleeting relationship between employer and worker (Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026). In Spain, as we will discuss more thoroughly in the next section, state retrenchment led to a subsidy programme in the form of cash transfers. This resulted in the bifurcation of the care market with the emergence on one end of for-profit corporatization in the form of digital platforms and on the other end of not-for-profit community care in the form of worker cooperatives. Labour conditions vastly differ between the two, illustrating how civil society involvement can diffuse the worker marginalization wrought by the cultural collusion of markets and states (Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026).

This special issue also examines the changing organization of care work under processes of corporatization and bureaucratization. Handapangoda (2026) contributes to this discussion through an analysis of labour brokerage in transnational care migration. Labour intermediation, as argued by Fudge and Strauss (2016) in their study of brokerage systems for migrant workers in Canada, intensifies workers' alienation by inserting profit-driven intermediaries between employer and employee, thereby further distancing workers from the means of production. Handapangoda, focusing on Sri Lankan migrant domestic workers in Kuwait, complicates this view by repositioning brokers not simply as exploitative figures, but as central conduits in the organization of domestic worker placement. Drawing on the sociology of translation, the author conceptualizes brokers as possessing 'translational expertise' – actors who not only arrange placements but actively shape the meanings, expectations, and conditions under which care work is defined and carried out. Informed by a Foucauldian understanding of power as productive, the paper illustrates how brokers translate between state policies, institutional frameworks, and household norms, producing culturally legible categories such as the 'good' worker and the 'good' employer. As quasi-public figures embedded in the bureaucratized infrastructure of care migration, brokers operate at the intersection of formal regulation and informal practice. In doing so, they become key nodes in a system that simultaneously structures and negotiates inequality, rendering labour brokerage a site of institutional translation, cultural signification, and contested formalization.

Inequalities

The papers in this special issue show that inequalities in care economies exceed relations of unequal exchange between employers and employees inside the

household or the workplace (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026). Reflecting the emergence of different configurations of inequality across institutions and geographic scales, papers also show how care inequalities define relations across nations (Handapangoda, 2026; Katona & Gábel, 2026) as well as within care industries (Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026) and in education (Ortiga, 2026).

New ‘public’ arrangements of care still tap into global care migrations as it is immigrant women, but also local women of colour, who are providing low-wage work across market venues (Parreñas, 2015). Migrant care workers thus remain an economic utility. Most domestic worker migration occurs from South to South with a dominant migration corridor being from Southeast Asia to West Asia (or the Middle East) (Parreñas, 2022). However, dominant discourse on care inequalities remains situated in a South–North perspective (Lutz, 2011; Parreñas, 2015). Although there has been a growth in research on South–South migration (Chikanda *et al.*, 2025; Schewel & Debray, 2024), further research is needed to more effectively understand the particularities of their migration patterns, labour market experiences and terms of residency. In contrast to migrants in Europe and North America, migrants in the Global South for instance are relegated to temporary labour migration. Migrants in the Global South are also subject to more restrictive residency requirements that bind them to solely working for one employer (Parreñas, 2022). Migrant workers with greater labour market flexibility are alienated in other ways. Katona and Gábel (2026) provides a glimpse of the challenges faced by migrant domestic workers in Hungary who find that their lack of recognition by the state aggravates their precarious labour status. Employers circumvent efforts to regularize and formalize domestic work by encouraging informal migration flows. This is the case in Czechia as well (Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026).

Care work is a development strategy achieved through labour migration as transnational care chains supply flexible, low-cost labour, especially from women in the Global South (Guevarra, 2009; Parreñas, 2000). Industries accordingly develop as educational and healthcare institutions emerge so as to extract value through the skilling and credentialing of care workers, linking care to broader profit-making systems. This point is further elaborated in Ortiga’s (2026) study of the nursing marketplace. Expanding on the theme of global inequality is her paper on the migrant nursing industry in the Philippines which illustrates how the middle and upper-middle class in an origin country can profit from the outmigration of care workers and thereby aggravate pre-existing class inequalities. She shows how ‘big business’ emerges in the care nurse migration industry as schools and hospitals proliferate and profit from outmigration. Her article shows how the process of skilling itself is a site of profit accumulation within global care economies. In the case of nurses, post-secondary institutions in source countries profit by enrolling large numbers of students with the promise of migration, despite knowing many will drop out or never leave. Hospitals also benefit by requiring nurses to work unpaid – or even pay for placements – to gain the experience needed for overseas recruitment. The paper shows how profit is extracted well

before migration occurs, linking care economies to an education and training industry built on the commodification of mobility and professional aspiration.

Then, finally, the special issue expands our understanding of the organization of care work, which is now highly regulated but not monitored. It is arguably formal in the market but informal in the workplace. This paradox results in the vulnerability of workers. Addressing multiple forms of inequalities for care workers is the paper by Martínez-Buján and Eijo (2026). They show how the greater use of part-time workers through digital platforms in Spain aggravates labour insecurities in this traditionally informal work. Digital platforms arguably represent a new form of labour brokerage that furthers worker alienation. In Spain, transformations in state regulation resulted in distributed care services with austerity measures transferring responsibility for care from the state to individuals. An increasing number of families have turned to third party mediation through digital platforms, which have heightened worker precarity when offering a marketplace for self-employed workers to sell their services or extending low-paid employment. The heightened insecurity for care workers in Spain is arguably shared by their counterparts in other countries. Digital platforms are expanding globally across Asia, Latin America, North America and Europe. The case of Spain also gives us hope as countering the precarity wrought by digital platforms is the emergence of worker cooperatives that allow care workers to claim labour recognition. Worker cooperatives provide care workers a means to sidestep their removal from the General Social Security Scheme and subjection to Special Scheme for Household Employment; demand a minimum hour of employment; and determine a higher wage rate that still, by avoiding corporate profits, manage to still cost families less.

Overall, the papers in this special issue describe the transformations engendered by the expansion of care economies from the private to the public, the informal to formal, and not-for-profit to for-profit. They call attention to the tensions engendered by these transformations including the resistance against regulation by both employers (Katona & Gábel, 2026) and employees (Pandey, 2026); the aggravated alienation of workers caused by corporatization (Handapangoda, 2026; Martínez-Buján & Eijo, 2026; Ortiga, 2026); the cultural collusion of states and markets in regulation that fails to protect workers (Uhde & Gheorghiev, 2026); and the tension between viewing care as a public or private responsibility (Ezzeddine & Matiaško, 2026).

Acknowledgements

Many of the papers in this special issue were initially presented at a symposium organized by Brigitte Aulenbacher and Wasana Handapangoda as part of the project, *'Ideal' Migrant Subjects: Domestic Service in Globalization*, funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), Project M 2724-G, Lise-Meitner-Grant at Johannes Kepler University, Institute of Sociology, Department for the Theory of Society and Social Analyses in Austria on 'Care Migration–Care Marketisation: Reflections on a Complex

Interplay', held on 23–24 March 2023. We also want to thank the Department of Philosophy and Cultural Heritage of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice for having hosted, on 27–28 November 2024, the workshop funded by the *Economy & Society* journal where the editors and all authors of this special issue were able to debate the draft papers.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This paper and special issue benefit from the funding support received from the *Economy and Society* special issue Competition as well as Princeton University.

Ethical approval statement

The research underpinning this paper did not involve human subjects and was not subject to the ethical approval process within the author's host university.

Notes

1 This is not to say women completely outsource care work. A recent report from the World Economic Forum (2021) indicates that women in the workforce remain burdened by the 'double shift' and are more likely to leave the workforce due to childcare demands.

2 The 'care diamond' expands the traditional care nexus of the market, state and family to recognize society, or what Razavi (2007, p. 21) describes as 'the heterogeneous cluster of care providers that is variously referred to as the "community", "voluntary", "non-market" or "non-profit" sector'.

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