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Decolonising Methodologies: Towards Alternative Approaches to Studying Women's Unpaid Care Work in the Global South

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ABSTRACT

This paper problematises dominant methodologies and epistemologies in research on unpaid care work in Global South contexts. Women's unpaid work is often called a 'burden' in Gender and Development (GAD) discourse, particularly by actors designing policies and practical interventions who cite evidence produced by feminist economists. Drawing on post-colonial feminist critique of Western feminists universalising their experiences of oppression, this paper argues feminist economists must incorporate the complex lived realities of unpaid care work into methodologies. Recognising the diversity of women in the Global South, and their ability to theorise their own oppression and the value of their labour is essential. Care scholars are encouraged to reflexively engage with decolonial perspectives, and design methodologies which elevate women's voices. This is imperative given the discursive power of feminist economics in shaping GAD agendas, policies, and interventions. Qualitative and interpretive approaches are proposed as one path to broaden knowledge production on unpaid care work.

KEYWORDS: Unpaid care work, global south, gender and development, qualitative methods, post-colonial feminism

Introduction

This paper aims to stimulate a critical and decolonial reflection on the epistemological and methodological approaches to studying women's unpaid care work in feminist economics. This is explored through a discussion of the implications and influence of academic research in this area on the work of development policymakers and practitioners in Global South contexts (Chopra & Nazneen, 2016). It begins by briefly tracing the background of the concept of unpaid care work, and the foundational contributions of feminist economists during the second-wave of feminism, and highlights dominant empirical approaches for measuring the value of unpaid care work. Turning to Gender and Development (GAD) policy and practice, the paper draws on critical

perspectives to argue that the lived reality and standpoints of diverse women in Global South contexts are currently marginalised, potentially influencing interventions around unpaid care work. The framing of unpaid care and domestic work as oppressive which was prevalent in second-wave feminist theorising becomes problematic when uncritically assumed to also reflect the experiences of women in contemporary Global South contexts. Based on an extensive cross-disciplinary literature review including decolonial and post-colonial feminist scholarship, I argue feminist economists should incorporate more interpretive qualitative methodologies in empirical studies of unpaid care work. The imperative project of decolonising academic knowledge production requires critical reflection, deconstruction, and even disruption of assumptions found in dominant Global North and Euro-Western perspectives (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). Given the influence of feminist economics on GAD policymaking and practice, scholars must recognise their significant discursive power in shaping development interventions which target and impact the lives of formerly colonised people.

Women's Unpaid Care Work and Social Reproduction

There is no universally agreed definition of unpaid care work, and terms such as unpaid domestic work, unpaid work and reproductive labour are often used interchangeably. Given the focus on GAD in this paper, I draw on a definition proposed in the context of development planning by Caroline Moser (1993). Based on anthropological research in Latin America, Moser defined three socially constructed roles which she observed for women (and men, girls and boys), namely productive, reproductive, and community-management/constituency-based politics. The reproductive role includes activities such as childbearing, childrearing and daily domestic household tasks and there is a vast body of literature on this role across many disciplines, prompting a need for collaboration and interdisciplinary research.

Since the nineteenth century, scholars have highlighted gendered aspects of the economy (Cameron & Gibson-Graham, 2003). In *The Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State* Engels argued women's reproductive labour in the family was essential for reproduction of society and capitalist relations (Engels, 1942). Socialist feminist political economists took this point of departure from traditional Marxism and began to develop and analyse the broader concept of social reproduction[1]. Social reproduction spotlighted the fact it is traditionally women who undertake reproductive labour without wages, making women the 'super-exploited' class of labour. In addition to capital, women were also seen as exploited by men in the private household who benefited from the surplus produced by their domestic work (Cameron, 1996)[2]. More contemporary research from feminist political economy perspectives includes the feminisation of low-wage factory jobs in export-oriented production, and the nature and

[1]As with unpaid care work, no single agreed definition of social reproduction exists, however Hoskyns & Rai (2007) define it as including biological reproduction; unpaid production in the home; social provisioning; the reproduction of culture and ideology; and the provision of sexual, emotional and affective services.

[2]This body of work was known as the domestic labour debates (Bergeron, 2016). It is important to note that this body of work was critiqued by many feminists of colour for positing all women experienced the same oppression, and failing to acknowledge how class, race and other identity factors intersected with gender to oppress women of colour outside their households.

consequences of global care chains (Ehrenreich & Hochschild, 2003; Standing, 1999). However social reproduction scholarship is often highly theoretical and abstract, critiques the gendered aspects of capitalist modes of production and accumulation, and proposes radical feminist imaginaries of society. Although integral for an emancipatory feminist political project, such research remains inaccessible to many policy and practice professionals who design interventions in Global South contexts.

Valuing Unpaid Care Work

The omission of women's reproductive labour from calculations of economic activities is a central concern for feminist economists (Benería, 1992). In 1988, Marilyn Waring (Waring 1988) argued women's reproductive labour should be 'counted' in GDP, and feminist economists are highly critical of the UN Systems of National Accounts method of calculating GDP which renders this labour invisible. Many scholars have dedicated their research to addressing this issue, with a primary strategy being the calculation of monetary value for reproductive labour[3] (Elson & Cagatay, 2000; Folbre, 2006; Folbre et al., 1992; Waring, 2003). Time-use surveys provide critical data for such empirical work, and strong feminist advocacy has contributed to increased collection of time-use data at national levels (Charmes, 2019). Feminist economists have also advocated for a theoretical shift away from treating women's unpaid care work as 'voluntary' (as per neo-classical economic models) to being accounted for as *work*.

The inclusion of Sustainable Development Goal 5.4 (SDG 5.4) which calls for recognising, valuing, and redistributing unpaid care work is a clear outcome of tremendous collective advocacy by feminist scholars studying women's contributions to the economy and society. Feminist economists in particular have begun to engage closely with policymakers and policy processes. Arguably they—like mainstream economists—are well-versed in the 'language' and tools of policymakers, and can produce the desired quantitative evidence to support policy recommendations for gender equality initiatives (Rai et al., 2019). Conceptualising women's reproductive labour as *work* and calculating values for unpaid care work have proved effective for engaging policymakers and GAD practitioners. Nonetheless there are implications of a feminist strategy which valorises monetary valuation of unpaid care work and warrants reflection.[4]

Alternative Theoretical Perspectives – the Complexity of Care

Feminist economic scholarship acknowledges that there are affective aspects of care work which cannot be measured or calculated. For example the 'Prisoners of Love' framework shows how caring motivations lead to low wages in paid care work (Folbre, 2012, 2006, 1986; Folbre et al., 1992). Susan Himmelweit (1995) warned against conceptualising reproductive labour as 'work', arguing this extends capitalist

[3]Common methods to compute values include (1) **Replacement cost** which calculates the cost to replace women's unpaid labour using the average wage for domestic and care workers (Eisner, 1989) (2) **Opportunity value** which calculates what women doing unpaid labour would earn if they were in paid labour (Rai, 2016) and (3) **Gross Household Product,** a method of calculating the value of output produced by women using commodities, labour and capital (Ironmonger, 1996).

[4]I would add many scholars are aware of the shortcomings of monetary valuation, as this was raised in several conferences/symposia I have attended whilst developing this paper. However, such figures remain compelling and cited widely in GAD policy and practice discourse.

notions of waged work, and excludes distinctive positive aspects of reproductive labour such as self-fulfilment. In the same vein, Nancy Hartsock argued women's reproductive roles result in a 'female existence that is in relation to others and the natural world' (Hartsock, 1983), and Marxist-feminist scholar Maria Mies says reproductive work 'was always both burden and enjoyment, and connected to production of life' (Mies, 1986; Peet & Hartwick, 2015). Although the emotional, subjective and relational aspects of reproductive labour are clearly acknowledged by feminist economists, more recent literature remains focused on valuing women's unpaid care work and ensuring it is incorporated into economic policies. This theme is increasingly appearing in GAD policy and practice; moreover as objective measures of well-being are important in the development industry, exploring the subjective affective aspects of unpaid care work are rarely built into empirical methodologies. This can leave gaps in understanding, for example, the impact of such factors on women's labour-related decisions.[5]

Feminist literature outside of the economics discipline and post-colonial feminist perspectives also highlight the complex nature of reproductive labour. For example, feminist philosophers of care-ethics argue that people are inherently relational beings, embodied, and mutually interdependent, which drives caring behaviour (Robinson, 2020). Although there has been much debate (and critique) amongst feminists around whether care-ethics essentialises women, post-colonial and non-Western feminists also often highlight the affective aspects of care and draw attention to women's complex lived experience. U.S. Black feminist scholar bell hooks describes motherhood as 'humanising labour' which has a complex role in defining Black women's identities (1984), and Chilisa and Ntseane (2010) emphasise African women's power *via* relational world-views of motherhood, family, sisterhood and friendship. African feminism in particular deeply engages with such issues, and centres the relational world-views of women (see Chilisa, 2020 chapter on post-colonial indigenous feminism).

It is this tension which I take as a point of departure to consider the implications of scholarly feminist economics research on GAD policy and practice. SDG 5.4 has sparked various (I)NGO and international organisation programmes and campaigns in Global South contexts[6]. The linking of reproductive roles to women's subordination theorised by second-wave feminists is reflected by the normative discourses of development actors, through frequent use of language such as 'burden' and 'drudgery' to describe women's unpaid labour. On the other hand, women undertaking paid labour are often framed positively, associated with terms such as 'empowerment', 'autonomy', and 'agency'. However reproductive labour, seen as embodied and relational, is widely understood to be experienced in complex ways. Few published empirical qualitative studies explore this in the Global South; interestingly Chung et al. (2019) show women in rural Tanzania experience joy and fulfilment from their reproductive roles. This raises a question of whether the experiences of second-wave feminists are being universalised—a contentious issue in light of the post-modern and post-structural thinking which defined the third-wave of feminism.

[5]For example, scholars studying female labour force participation in South Asia are 'puzzled' by stagnating rates despite availability of jobs and other improving gender equality indicators, (Heintz et al., 2018).

[6]See Chopra and Nazneen (Chopra & Nazneen, 2016) for a review of programmes related to unpaid care work, conducted for a UN High Level Panel Consultation on the care economy.

Feminist Epistemology

In the 1980s, feminists first challenged Enlightenment thinking which posited an objective reality can be known through rational, scientific methods. Feminists from a range of disciplines argued that research which claimed to be neutral was far from it, demonstrating how 'objective' research carried marks of androcentrism and racism (Harding, 1986; Rose, 1983; Smith, 2002). Feminist standpoint theory (FST) emerged from this thinking[7] and included two key aspects which galvanised feminist theory. The first was the notion that knowledge is *socially situated*. Women know their experiences and oppression better than outsiders, particularly when researchers are from the dominant group (i.e. men). The second was the notion of *epistemic advantage* which drew on Marxist ideas of the proletariat knowing their oppression better than their oppressors (Hartsock, 1998). Feminists argued that women know their oppression through lived experience; noted sociologist Dorothy Smith challenged the fact her knowledge of being a wife and mother was not seen as legitimate in her academic work, as knowledge had to be 'objective' (2002). FST ultimately posited that a collective struggle can and should be identified for a political project to emancipate women from patriarchal oppression. The struggle however was not identified by all women, but rather by the collective group of 'conscious' feminists, reflecting Marxist ideas of raising the collective consciousness of the proletariat. This was highly critiqued by feminists of colour in the late 1980s and early 1990s, drawing on emerging post-structural and post-modern thinking, resulting in the third-wave of feminism. Black feminists in the U.S. and (then-called) Third World feminists challenged standpoint feminists—who were primarily White, middle-class, educated women—saying they could not 'know' the oppression of all women due to intersecting oppressions such as race and class.[8]

Such epistemological debates are unlikely to engage GAD policymakers and practitioners, but they raise questions for feminist economists and scholars of unpaid care work. Reflecting on the foundational feminist notions of *situated knowledge* and *epistemic advantage* for research in Global South contexts begs the question of who's 'standpoint' is being elevated. Contemporary feminist theorising stands on the shoulders of second-wave feminists, and the vast literature from that period linking women's unequal reproductive labour to their subordination arguably underpins assumptions in care literature. Indeed much of the language is explicit—one study of time-use data called domestic work a 'routine, repetitive and disliked activity' (Altintas & Sullivan, 2016), and others call it 'invisible labour which creates a power imbalance between couples', and 'entrenches women in subordination' (Daigle et al., 2017; Davis & Greenstein, 2013).

Drawing on my positionality as a South Asian diaspora scholar and GAD practitioner concerned with decolonising development, I argue framings of women's experiences of reproductive labour—grounded in second-wave feminist theory—should not be invariably assumed for Global South women. Diverse women's perceptions are likely to be impacted by class, ability, sexual orientation and many other

[7]FST was articulated partly in response to feminist empiricism which argued male or racial bias in science was essentially 'bad science', and could be addressed by adhering to empiricist methods more closely (Harding, 1986).

[8]It is important to note FST developed significantly from these critiques, and theorists later acknowledged the need to have plural standpoints.

intersecting identity factors, a concept known as intersectionality which is now central to GAD discourses (Crenshaw, 2013). Scholars must also carefully consider the relationships between individual researchers and the 'researched' (Rose, 1997). Gender scholars affiliated with higher education institutions, NGO's, international organisations etc. are undoubtedly the dominant actor, and Global South women who participate in research are the less powerful interlocutor. Thus drawing on FST, I argue women in the Global South have 'epistemic advantage' and 'situated knowledge' of their reproductive roles. This should be clearly reflected in the methodologies of scholarly research in such contexts, and is particularly pressing given the current decolonial turn in academia.

Methodologies in Care Research and Implications for GAD Policy and Practice

An extensive literature review found methodologies for studying reproductive roles in Global South contexts align with the broader tendency to use quantitative methods within feminist economics (Tejani, 2019). This is perhaps linked to disciplinary standards and academic pressures to publish research employing conventionally favoured methods, but also likely due to the methodological training of feminist economists. Economists are rarely trained in data generation, relying on quantitative data sets produced by others (Basole & Ramnarain, 2016), reflected by many published empirical studies of unpaid care work using secondary time-use data. However, relying on quantitative data to answer questions designed within a positivist paradigm leaves limited space to understand the daily realities, decision-making and complexities of women's labour-related behaviour in different contexts. Some time-use surveys include subjective evaluations of activities; for example in the U.S. and UK national surveys, activities are scored for their enjoyment (Gershuny, 2011). However, as Kahneman et al. (2004) argue, people's instantaneous enjoyment of an activity (called *objective* happiness) cannot be equated with *subjective* happiness, which is a more considered judgement of well-being made at a distance from the period being measured. Therefore, even if some assessment of enjoyment is made by respondents of time-use surveys, understanding how people really feel about a particular activity will be limited. I suggest that feminist economists who seek to understand women's reproductive roles in Global South contexts may find qualitative methods are more appropriate to explore its complex, affective and subjective aspects. Research by networks of Global South feminists such as the well-known Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN) network, as well as international networks such as The Community Economies Research Network (CERN) and the City Hub and Network for Gender Equity (CHANGE) embrace unconventional methodologies which can provide valuable literature, particularly for young feminist economists interested in care in Global South contexts (Blanco & Cuervo, 2021; CHANGE, 2023; Narezo, 2022).

All-encompassing conceptualisations of unpaid care work can also obscure the diverse array of tasks which constitute it. Activities such as laundry, fetching water, cooking, and childcare are frequently grouped together in the discourse (and data collection instruments), although tasks which are relational are likely to be experienced more subjectively, emotionally, and inconsistently. As argued previously, reproductive labour is embodied and can simultaneously bring joy or feel like a

burden. Reliance on econometric techniques using time-use data, calculating monetary valuations etc., leaves readers of feminist economics literature with a sense of 'something missing'—the intrinsic emotional aspects we experience within our own daily acts of direct and indirect care for others.

The implications of the theoretical and methodological challenges raised in this paper are pertinent to GAD. Stagnating female labour force participation rates in South Asian countries have 'puzzled' economists (Heintz et al., 2018), and gender norms are often cited as a key reason women prioritise reproductive roles over paid work opportunities. While women may indeed conform to hegemonic and powerful gender norms which assign unpaid care work to women in such contexts, it is important to consider traditional gendered roles have been observed for hundreds (or thousands) of years and can be closely linked to feelings of identity, spirituality, and duty to their families, communities and God. Uma Narayan (1989) for example says 'Western feminists must learn to think within powerful traditions which not only oppress women, but also confer a high value on women's roles as wives and mothers which are highly praised in many non-Western countries'. Chilla Bulbeck similarly argues that Western feminists 'have seen motherhood as a prison… which may be due to isolated nuclear families and lack of power or prestige accorded to mothers in their contexts' (Bulbeck, 1997). She contrasts this with wider appreciation of motherhood in Global South cultures, demonstrated by support from fathers, other kin, schools and governments. Whether women in patriarchal contexts hold such views due to adaptive preferences is an important issue (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 1988), and a central debate in feminism centres on the tensions between recognising women's agency and the feminist political goal of consciousness raising (Khader, 2012). Methodologies for studying unpaid care work must acknowledge women's responses to research questions will be shaped by hegemonic patriarchal social norms. The tendency to employ deductive, quantitative methodologies in feminist economics however can leave significant gaps in understanding. Broadening methodologies to engage more deeply with diverse Global South women's perspectives and social norms in their contexts is therefore imperative. Neglecting to do so leaves scholars open to charges of 'discursive colonization', often made by post-colonial feminists to Western feminists (Mohanty, 1988; Spivak, 1988).

In *The Handbook of Feminist Economics* (2021) Peregrine Schwartz-Shea acknowledges feminist economists greater inclination to generate their own data, but suggests they go further by situating research within interpretivist paradigms. Drawing on this and a rich body of feminist methodological literature[9] (Harcourt et al., 2022), I suggest qualitative-interpretive approaches to studying women's reproductive roles can complement valuable quantitative research being produced by feminist economists. As interpretive approaches focus on lived experiences and meaning-in-context, they enable deeper engagement with research participants and demand close attention to social contexts. Feminist economists should be empowered to go beyond quantitative data analysis techniques and employ unconventional, creative, and

[9]A rich body of work by feminists exists which discusses feminist methods (both qualitative and quantitative). Of particular relevance is Maria Mies's calls for feminist research to consider unconscious female subjectivity. She critiques quantitative surveys for taking a 'view from above', creating a sense of hierarchy/distrust which may encourage marginalised women to show 'expected behaviour' rather than 'real' behaviour (Mies, 1983).

innovative methods to generate primary data on unpaid care work, particularly in post-colonial contexts. Global South women's experiences must be epistemically advantaged, to produce more situated and context-specific knowledge of reproductive roles. Such an ontological shift can help feminist economists 'get closer' to the phenomena they are studying than deductive positivist approaches (Schwartz-Shea, 2021), and also potentially presents a practical strategy to begin 'decolonising' academic scholarship (Icaza Garza, 2021).

Decolonising Unpaid Care Work Research in Feminist Economics

Since the 1980s scholars have challenged Western hegemony in academia by re-contextualising historical knowledge from previously colonised perspectives (Said, 1978). The post-colonial turn saw feminist scholars such as Chandra Mohanty and Ania Loomba strongly critique Western feminists for 'othering' Global South women as submissive and in need of saving (Loomba & Lukose, 2020; Mohanty, 2003, 1988). Indigenous and post-colonial scholars also began developing decolonial theories aiming to deconstruct academic knowledge (Chilisa, 2020; Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). These critical projects have gained momentum within and outside of academia, and feminist economists must meet the challenge of incorporating decolonial theory into their work.

Although a vast body of work which cannot be justifiably summarised here, a central call of decolonial theory is the centring of concerns and world-views of non-Western individuals and theorising from 'othered' perspectives (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). In the context of GAD research led by academics or other development actors, space must be created for participants to express their world-views, theorisation should elevate their standpoints or—put simply—should 'let them speak' (Spivak, 1988). GAD policymakers and practitioners designing unpaid care work interventions must refrain from framing women who appear to prioritise their reproductive roles as disempowered, exploited, burdened and/or submitting to gender norms which oppress them. The more recent decolonial turn in academia implores feminist economists and care researchers to reflect on their ontological and epistemological assumptions, and look beyond conventional methodologies (Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). This is particularly imperative for all scholars who study women in postcolonial contexts. Eminent decolonial scholar Syed Hussein Alatas's concept of the 'captive mind' critiques scholars in the Global South who uncritically accept Western literature which dominates social science (Alatas, 1977; Byrd et al., 2022), and Bagele Chilisa reminds feminist researchers in post-colonial contexts that 'women are capable of critical reflection… [and] able to theorise their own oppression' (2020).

Decolonising research requires scholars to critically engage with, and potentially deconstruct Western paradigms. Therefore unpaid care work researchers must reflect on the assumptions, framing and standpoints of feminists who established this pivotal body of work. This is certainly an immense project which requires collective commitment and sustained effort. Nonetheless, I propose feminist economists studying women's reproductive roles have much to gain through embracing interpretivist approaches. Qualitative methods can of course be employed in positivist research (using structured and semi-structured interviews); interpretivist paradigms however encourage researchers to prioritise methods which allow participants to share their

lived experiences and focus on meaning-making[10]. Such a shift will not come easy to feminist economists and will require training and collaboration with scholars from other disciplines who more naturally apply interpretive methods (such as anthropologists). Importantly, Schwartz-Shea (2021) warns that mixed-methods studies (which are increasingly popular in GAD) are often incoherent philosophically. Research located within an interpretive paradigm posits that multiple socially constructed realities exist, unlike a positivist paradigm which believes there is an 'objective' reality. If one philosophically accepts individuals construct their own realities, social phenomena can arguably be better understood from the perspectives (or standpoint) of those experiencing them. Aligning oneself with and interpretivist paradigm, although not decolonial in itself, may be more appropriate where research participants come from a marginalised group—as is the case where Global South women are being 'researched' by more powerful GAD or economics researchers[11]. To conclude this section, feminist economists who study women's reproductive roles in Global South contexts, may find interpretive approaches provide new answers (and new questions) to understand what motivates diverse women's labour-related behaviour and decisions.

Decolonial theory rouses challenging and even overwhelming issues for scholars and practitioners based in or affiliated with Global North and Western institutions. Professionals in the development industry face pressure to advocate neo-liberal policies favouring market-centric approaches, and design short-term interventions with tangible, measurable results. However, the underlying narrative of *us* (development organisations) helping *them* ('beneficiaries' in the Global South) which is prevalent in the industry has become upended by growing calls to decolonise development. This shift presents opportunities and potential for GAD researchers to 'disrupt taken for granted assumptions and perspectives' (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021). As argued throughout this paper, researchers studying women's reproductive roles in the Global South should engage with underlying assumptions and historical roots of Western theoretical frameworks. This becomes more pressing when reflecting on Linda Tuhiwai Smith's contention that Western conceptualisations of time, space, work, gender etc. are 'not universally experienced' (2021). This perspective raises specific questions around the wide application of time-use data in empirical research, and the design of data collection tools such as stylised diaries.

There is no checklist to decolonise research, rather it is 'a continual process to dismantle and recreate knowledge… both within and outside the academy' (Zavala, 2013). Many actors in the development industry have made observable efforts to 'decolonise' their strategies and operations. However decolonisation of GAD knowledge production, policymaking and practice must be done holistically, reflecting deeply with contentions raised by decolonial scholars. These are immense challenges which cannot be solved methodologically alone. However this paper argues qualitative methods, grounded in decolonial theory and research praxis, provide opportunities for unpaid care work researchers to move the agenda forward. Thambinathan and Kinsella

[10]Some examples would be methods used in feminist participatory action research, life histories, and other ethnographic methods.

[11]Moreover, the interpretive philosophical approach is consistent with both feminist standpoint theory (Haraway, 1988; Harding, 1986; Hartsock, 1983; Smith, 2002) and postcolonial feminist theory (Hooks, 1984; Loomba & Lukose, 2020; Mohanty, 1988).

(2021) provide tangible ways to incorporate decolonial learning into qualitative methodologies, including reflexivity, respect for self-determination, embracing 'other' ways of knowing and transformative practices. Participatory methods, engaging 'cultural brokers' (ibid) and adopting Freirean principles (Freire, 1970) can all support the production of decolonial research by feminist economists and GAD scholars.

Concluding Remarks

This paper recognises the immense scholarship of feminist economists studying women's unpaid contributions to the economy and society, and the success of academics within this heterodox school challenging androcentric biases in mainstream economics. As raised by Elissa Braunstein during the Tracy Mott Workshop 2023 at the University of Denver preceding this Special Issue, feminist economists are being 'given a seat at the table' to engage with policymakers, which can be partly credited to quantitative 'hard' evidence showing why policies must address feminist concerns.

However there are consequences of such a strategy within the GAD policy and practice field, where quantitative data is cited for interventions aimed at reducing and redistributing women's unpaid care work 'burden' in the Global South. As highlighted by critical development scholars, actors in the development industry often oversimplify the diverse lives of people in the Global South, and others have argued women and girls are particularly 'instrumentalised' as untapped labour potential for economic growth strategies (Wilson, 2015). Therefore, feminist scholars who publish research on unpaid care work in Global South contexts must be aware of their discursive power in shaping development agendas, policies and practical interventions. Given post-colonial and post-modern critiques of Western feminists universalising women's oppression, the experiences of feminists who first linked unequal household divisions of labour to women's subordination should not be uncritically applied to women living in the Global South. Feminist scholarship around unpaid care work is nuanced, thoughtful and complex—often addressing the concurrent joy and burden, and emotional aspects of reproductive labour. However current measurements of the opportunity cost, monetary value and time spent on unpaid care work rarely account for these, and potentially influence the design of short-term GAD policy and practice interventions.

This paper argues feminist economists studying unpaid care work—particularly in the Global South—should embrace 'unconventional' interpretive, qualitative methodologies to generate primary data. Qualitative and interpretive approaches can complement quantitative studies using secondary data, and 'unravel the connections between complex social realities and people's stories' (Sathyamala, 2022). Another practical suggestion is to develop epistemic communities around unpaid care work which elevate researchers from Global South countries, to address power imbalances in feminist academic knowledge production. Global South-based researchers may be well-placed to meaningfully engage women on how they experience and value their reproductive and productive roles, rather than uncritically assuming experiences of Global North/White/Euro-Western feminists hold in these very different contexts.

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