KHAZANAH
RESEARCH
INSTITUTE

DISCUSSION PAPER 04/21 | 06 JULY 2021

Wages for Housework: Reflections for Malaysia

Christopher Choong

Khazanah Research Institute

The **KRI Discussion Papers** are a series of research documents by the author(s) discussing and examining pressing and emerging issues. They are stand-alone products published to stimulate discussion and contribute to public discourse. In that respect, readers are encouraged to submit their comments directly to the authors.

The views and opinions expressed are those of the author and may not necessarily represent the official views of KRI. All errors remain authors' own.

DISCUSSION PAPER 04/21 | 06 JULY 2021

Wages for Housework: Reflections for Malaysia

This discussion paper was prepared by Christopher Choong Weng Wai from the Khazanah Research Institute (KRI). This paper is adapted from essays submitted to the London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE), made possible by support from the Atlantic Fellows in Social and Economic Equity (AFSEE) Programme. The author is grateful to anonymous reviewers from the LSE for their valuable comments on the earlier essays. The views expressed are solely those of the author and do not represent those of the LSE and AFSEE.

Authors' email address: **Christopher.Choong@krinstitute.org**

Cover photo: Chores in the morning, Johannesburg, South Africa. Scott Umstattd via Unsplash.

DISCUSSION PAPER 04/21 | 06 JULY 2021

Wages for Housework: Reflections for Malaysia

Christopher Choong

Summary

- The International Feminist Collective launched the Wages for Housework campaign in the 1970s with the proposition that the government should pay a weekly wage to women for their social reproductive labour in the domestic sphere (or housework). "They say it is love, we say it is unwaged work", quipped Silvia Federici memorably, a key proponent of the Wages for Housework campaign.

- The wages for housework debate locates unpaid care and gender inequality within the broader structures and processes of capitalism in explaining how the capitalist economy renders feminised domestic labour invisible and exploitable. Against this backdrop, paying for housework was derived as a theoretically informed proposition to confer symbolic recognition to housework *as work*, and compel an end to the essentialising features of women's domestic labour and the nuclear family.

- While the proposal of a weekly wage for housework did not take off, the debate surrounding this campaign offers rich theoretical and policy insights into the contemporary global crisis of care. The contemporary global crisis of care is characterised by the transition from industrial capitalism to neoliberal capitalism, where women have been increasingly mobilised to participate in the expanding service-oriented economy. At the same time, housework has been outsourced to the market, to newly commodified care sectors which are feminised and precarious but remains unaffordable to large segments of the population.

- Not spared from the global crisis of care, Malaysia's policy approach in addressing unpaid care and gender inequality can be described as a "dual-earner family model", where there is a strong focus on the productive sphere by getting both women and men to work and become income earners. Unpaid care is constructed as a constraint, pulling women back from more "productive" work, hence policies are needed to overcome this constraint.

- However, lessons from the wages for housework debate suggest that the dual-earner family model may not only be inadequate but theoretically flawed. While paying for housework alone is insufficient to address structural invisibility and exploitation in the care economy, three recommendations, drawn from the broader theoretical underpinnings of wages for housework, are put forward: (i) expand the role of the state in the face of an emerging care crisis; (ii) put in place a policy mix to support community care work; and (iii) integrate care migration into the policy architecture. These broad recommendations are discussed reflexively alongside the more specific proposals in the Time to Care report published by Khazanah Research Institute in 2019.

Introduction

The impetus for recognising care work and social reproduction in the form of pecuniary compensation can be traced back to the radical feminist proposition in the 1970s that "wages for housework" is pivotal in giving visibility to the labour of social reproduction (Dalla Costa and James 1975). While the original idea of a weekly wage for housework paid by the government did not materialise, the proposition still resonates in contemporary discourses on the global crisis of care (Bhattacharya 2017; Fraser 2016). Drawing on relevant scholarship on care labour, gender and social reproduction, I argue that paying for care work is inadequate in redressing the structural invisibility and exploitation of the labour of social reproduction. Instead, paying for care work must be carried out in tandem with a more radical reorganising of the care economy, an argument that can be derived from the broader theoretical underpinnings of the Wages for Housework campaign. The wages for housework proposition also provides rich theoretical and policy reflections for Malaysia on matters pertaining to unpaid care work and gender inequality.

This paper proceeds as follows. In the next section, I will expound on the notions of "invisibility" and "exploitation" within a framework of patriarchal capitalism. This is followed by a discussion on the radical feminist critique using these notions in the 1970s, leading to the Wages for Housework campaign. I will then highlight and deliberate the central theoretical debates on the wages for housework proposition, followed by reflections on their relevance in addressing the contemporary global crisis of care. Building on these broader discourses, I will then discuss the case of Malaysia, specifically assessing the effectiveness of the dual-earner family model in the country. This will be followed by a discussion on the changes that need to be made to the dual-earner family model to ensure that care and gender inequalities are more effectively addressed. In discussing these changes, I will also reflexively locate the recommendations of the Time to Care report published by Khazanah Research Institute in 2019 and suggest how they could be reconsidered given changing conditions.

Invisibility and exploitation in patriarchal capitalism

In this paper, the notions of invisibility and exploitation take as their departure point the Marxist theory of exploitation which centres the capitalist extraction of surplus value from workers as the primary mode of labour exploitation (Marx and Engels 1967). However, this theory has been criticised for focusing inordinately on the productive sphere as the site of exploitation—and eventual liberation, while ignoring the social reproductive sphere, which encompasses households, kinships and communities (Bhattacharya 2017; Federici 2012). This view is also deeply patriarchal in that it amplifies the exploitations of male workers in the formal economy but maintains a separate domain for the predominantly female workers in the domestic economy. The result is that social reproduction is ignored and under-theorised[1], perceived to be delinked from productive work. Therefore, the invisibility and exploitation of care work must first be

[1] Engels did make the point that sexual inequality, subjecting women to subordinate position, was the outcome of the private property institution, propelled into existence by the rise of industrial capitalism (Engels 2010), but social reproduction remains inconsequential in the theorising of classical Marxism.

located within patriarchal capitalism, and not patriarchy or capitalism per se (Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson et al. 2016).

The separation of production and social reproduction into distinct spheres is not natural but came about through a historically specific period of capitalist development (Harris 1981). Prior to industrial capitalism, productive and social reproductive activities were intertwined. Women and men produced food, textiles and other daily necessities in home-based economies (Davis 1983). Production in pre-capitalist society was carried out mainly to fulfil own consumption needs, whereas the exchanges of produce were undergirded by social relationships of reciprocity and redistribution instead of the market logic of industrial capitalism (Dalton 1965).

However, with the advent of industrial capitalism, production for exchange was shifted out of the households into the factories. Mass production for exchange, fuelled by the drive to make profits, was accompanied by the movement of (predominantly) male workers to the factories. On the other hand, production for own consumption, much reduced in scope under industrial capitalism, remained within households and continued to be carried out by (predominantly) women. The entire process also altered the conception of value in such a way that exchange value (production for exchange) was given prominence and regarded as "productive", underpinned by its capacity to generate profits, while use value (production for own consumption) was constructed as "primitive", contrasted with the more "advanced" industrial modes of production, and hence rendered as "unproductive" and "unprofitable" (Davis 1983).

Therefore, care work and the broader labour of social reproduction are not recognised nor valued as work in the capitalist economy, driven by the fictitious and gendered separation of production and social reproduction which persists to this day. Care work and social reproduction are cast into the realm of use value, construed as primitive, unproductive and unprofitable. In this sense, structural invisibility has to be understood not in terms of whether care work is being seen or appreciated by individuals, but by its non-recognition as work in the economic production cycles and processes. As a result, the value of care work and social reproduction are being extracted for capital accumulation without, or with minimal, financial recompense, thus constituting patriarchal capitalism as an exploitative system.

A historical response in wages for housework

In the 1970s, the feminist articulation and critique of patriarchal capitalism were spearheaded by radical feminists such as Silvia Federici, Mariarosa Dalla Costa, Selma James and Leopoldina Fortunati (Federici 2012, 92). They made the forceful point that the exploitation of women's labour at home occupies the core of the capitalist system (Dalla Costa and James 1975; Federici 1975), foregrounding the role of households in how we should understand the economy as well as demystifying the theoretical and political separation between production and social reproduction. It culminated with the founding of the International Feminist Collective, which drew attention to "the subordination of the wageless worker to the waged worker behind which is hidden the productivity, i.e., the exploitation, of the labour of women in the home and the cause of their more intense exploitation out of it." (Jaffe 2018)

Federici (1975, 2-4) further contends that capitalism has not only denied housework its rightful recognition as work but imputes feminine qualities of love and marriage into women's labour at home. In other words, capitalism goes beyond hiding the exploitation of women's domestic labour

to essentialising them as something intrinsic to womanhood. This ideological act of essentialising housework is also extended to households (Harris 1981), especially the idea of the nuclear family as being natural and abiding, when it is in fact a specific configuration of the family to serve a particular phase of capitalism (Dalla Costa and James 1975).

It was this essentialising posture of women performing housework in the nuclear family, their role invisible to capitalist production and their domestic labour extracted without commensurate remuneration, that set the backdrop for the International Feminist Collective to launch the International Wages for Housework Campaign in 1972 (Federici et al. 2018). For this reason, the demand for wages to be paid for housework was not premised on monetary motivation in and of itself but sprang out of a theoretically informed ambition to confer symbolic recognition to housework as work and compel an end to the essentialising features of women's domestic labour and the nuclear family (Federici 1975).

There are two further traits of the wages for housework proposition that should be expounded, without which the proposition becomes susceptible to abstraction from its theoretical underpinnings, and vulnerable to straw man fallacies. First, the pursuit of recognition for housework should not be grounded in the idea that proponents conceived housework as inherently meaningful and dignified. In fact, it is precisely the drudgery of housework, which Federici (1975, 1) describes as "worse than death", when made visible via wages, that would put women in a position where they could refuse these drudgery and exploitation (Dalla Costa and James 1975; Federici 1975). Second, the demand for a weekly wage to be paid by the government was not a call for welfare payments, nor an outsourcing of care responsibilities to the state. Instead, it was intended as remuneration for work (hence the term "wages") in which the household or community would still maintain control over the organisation of the work. To quote Federici (1975, 7), "It is one thing to organise communally the way we want to eat (by ourselves, in groups, etc.) and then ask the State to pay for it, and it is the opposite thing to ask the State to organise our meals."

Theoretical salience of the wages for housework debates

There are at least three key features, pertinent to our present-day reflections, which can be derived from the debates on wages for housework. First, paying for care work must be situated within a granular understanding of how capitalism, as it evolves, reproduces different forms of invisibility and exploitation in the care economy. Second, proposals to redress structural invisibility and exploitation of social reproduction must incorporate both the objectives of recognition and valuation in their strategies. Third, all recognition and valuation strategies must be rooted in the end goal of decommodification. All these suggest that the unitary act of paying for care work must be embedded within broader structural changes in the care economy for it to be effective. These three features will be discussed in turn.

One of the central, but perhaps subtler, debates surrounding the cogency of wages for housework was whether social reproduction forms an intrinsic part of capitalism or is a precondition that exists outside of capitalism. While proponents of wages for housework assumed the former position (Dalla Costa and James 1975; Federici 1975), critics argued that social reproduction is not a constitutive element in the internal logic of capitalism but serves as a precondition of capitalism (Davis 1983, 234-236) and produces workers outside of the capitalist system

(Ferguson et al. 2016, 30). A possible interpretation of this debate is that proponents of wages for housework embraced a teleological view of capitalist development by asserting that the non-worker had to be recognised as worker first (commodification) before the struggle for decommodification could take place. On the other hand, premised on the argument that social reproduction resides outside of capitalism's internal logic, Davis (1983) does not see the need for a transitional, commodification strategy via wages for housework, but prefers to move directly to decommodification instead. While this may appear to be hair-splitting theoretical disputes at first glance, upon deeper reflections, it actually reveals the emphasis placed on a fine-grained understanding of capitalism, by both proponents and opponents of wages for housework, in devising strategies to redress the invisibility and exploitation of social reproduction.

Within this fine-grained understanding of capitalism, Federici (1975, 5) posits that "it is absurd to compare the struggle of women for wages to the struggle of male workers in the factory for more wages", arguably suggesting that there is a conceptual difference between the objectives of recognition and valuation. It is a view premised on the need to first attain the right to be recognised as work, before demands can be made to value the work through higher wages. However, Davis (1983, 240) insinuates that this is "an unrealisable dream", citing the experiences of Black women who were paid low wages for doing housework in white families, consequently suffered from "the double burden of wage labour and housework" and neglected their own families. In essentialising housework with feminine attributes, capitalism not only reduces housework to women's natural role, but also depicts women's work in the formal economy as low value and degraded (Ferguson et al. 2016; Harris 1981). Thus, the recognition and valuation of care work must be pursued concurrently.

Despite these differences pertaining to the means, both proponents and opponents of wages for housework shared the end goal of decommodification i.e., to abolish the privatised character of housework and replace it with non-profit, community-based care provisions. Proponents argued for the destruction of the housewife to break "the tradition of privatised female, with all its rivalry, and reconstructing a real solidarity among women" (Dalla Costa and James 1975) while opponents, represented here by Davis, urged for "(t)he abolition of housework as the private responsibility of individual women… (where) the socialisation of housework… presupposes an end to the profit-motive's reign over the economy" (Davis 1983). While there was convergence on decommodification, the debate revolved around the role of technology, traversing between the optimism that technology could overturn the primitive character of housework (Davis 1983) and scepticism that social reproduction, involving deeply imbued human interactions, could be reduced to technological solutions (Federici 2012).

Contemporary global crisis of care

What are the implications of the wages for housework debate for the contemporary global crisis of care and the idea of paying for care work as redressal? The first key feature extracted from the debate suggests the importance of situating new forms of invisibility and exploitation within a fine-grained understanding of how capitalism has shifted from industrial capitalism to neoliberal capitalism. While women have provided full-time care in the domestic sphere in industrial capitalism, women have been increasingly mobilised to leave this sphere and participate in the expanding service-oriented economy under neoliberal capitalism (Fraser 2016). In fact, women's participation in the labour force has been the dominant focus of many gender equality agenda

(Achim Daniel Schmillen et al. 2019; International Monetary Fund 2018; World Bank 2012). The care gap that this has resulted is constructed by the neoliberal ideology as something that can be resolved by the market, while the state retreats to a narrower agenda of addressing poverty (Fraser 2016). Households are transformed from a male breadwinner model to a gendered dual earner model (Razavi 2007), where they are expected to purchase their care needs from the market with their dual incomes. The reliance on the market is not only for care services but also the hiring of predominantly female migrant workers (Bettio, Simonazzi, and Villa 2006; Da Roit and Weicht 2013; Williams 2012) to work at home and in the newly commodified care sectors e.g., childcare, eldercare, catering and cleaning (Jeffries 2018; Kofman and Raghuram 2015). These transformed households and commodified care sectors, which depend on cheap labour from the Global South, constitute new forms of invisibility and exploitation under patriarchal neoliberal capitalism.

Against this backdrop, the second key feature of the debate shows the limits of paying for care work as a strategy to recognise it as work, without challenging the conditions under which this work is being valued. These commodified care sectors pay low wages to women (Bettio, Simonazzi, and Villa 2006; Da Roit and Weicht 2013; Williams 2012), as the profit motive becomes the overriding principle in wage determination and builds on the devaluation derived from essentialising care work as feminine. This is further entrenched by xenophobic sentiments propelled by the racial-migration nexus (Lutz 2016), sentiments that are often invoked to justify low wages for care migrant workers. The wages paid are insufficient to cover the full maintenance of the worker and her families (Shah and Lerche 2020), where their social reproduction costs are subsidised by feminised and racialised global care chains stretching all the way to the Global South (Hochschild 2015). Therefore, patriarchal neoliberal capitalism has created a dichotomous care economy on the back of low-waged care migrant workers—between those who can afford commodified care and those who cannot afford (Fraser 2016). Paying for care work can only be meaningful if this neoliberal organisation of the global care economy is deconstructed and reorganised.

The reorganising of the care economy should pivot around the end goal of decommodification, as suggested by the third key feature of the debate. This means moving beyond the preoccupation of whether care work is paid and by how much, as important as they are, to how the payment is determined and to what end it serves. Under neoliberal capitalism, payment for work hinges heavily on the notion of labour productivity, which is especially problematic for care work given its labour-intensive nature. There are also trade-offs with the quality of care in the drive for higher productivity[2]. While technology could increase the productivity of some domestic work e.g., laundry, cleaning, cooking, it does not reduce the hours of direct care work (Kofman and Raghuram 2015), especially those involving affective and emotional labour (Federici 2012; Hochschild 2015). Instead, decommodification as a basis for wage determination means "uphold(ing) a socially acceptable standard of living *independently of market participation* (emphasis mine)" (Esping-Andersen 1990, 37) and broadening the conception of value to include use value (Oran and Bhattacharya 2017). More specifically, paying for care work in such a way

[2] Baumol has written about this dilemma for the performing arts (Baumol and Bowen 1993). Paraphrasing Baumol, Himmelweit (2007, 584) describes this dilemma using the example of a string quartet, "…neither cutting the number of players nor playing faster could raise its labour productivity without substantially changing the nature of what it produced." This analogy can be extended to care work.

can only be compelling if it is carried out in tandem with other decommodification strategies including fostering community care work; restructuring the formal economy to allow community care to flourish e.g., reducing working hours or providing universal basic income (Graeber and Cerutti 2018); challenging narrow community boundaries in conferring rights and benefits, currently delineated by the race-migration nexus; as well as attending to the needs of care workers and their families across borders.

The Malaysian context

In Malaysia, the discourse on unpaid care work and gender inequality is shaped by the dominant normative lens of gender equality in the labour market, with the government having concrete targets on female labour force participation rate (FLPR). This emphasis on gender equality in the labour market is coupled with incentives and measures to broaden private-sector provision of care, while public provision is mainly focused on the poor (Lee and Choong 2019), confining state responsibility to a narrower conception of welfare. In the Time to Care report, we have characterised this set of policies as the "universal breadwinner model" following the typology of Fraser 1994. This typology was updated in Fraser 2016 as the "two-earner households model", configured by the neoliberal capitalist tendencies of a retreating state and the rise of care migration from the Global South.

However, there are important ways Malaysia does not fit neatly into this typology. First, Malaysia never had a welfare state, at least not the kind of extensive public provision of care that supports industrial capitalism (Mohd 2012). Hence, there was no "retreat" of the state in the transition from industrial capitalism to neoliberal capitalism, only a reinforcement of the ideology that the state should not expand its role as a provider of care services. Second, although Malaysia is a country in the Global South, it has relied on migrant domestic workers from Southeast Asia since 1984 (Devadason and Meng 2011; Del Carpio et al. 2013). However, this migrant-in-the-family care model has declined in recent years (Khazanah Research Institute 2018). Therefore, to acknowledge that the policy typology in Malaysia retains similar features as Fraser's typologies but also reveals important differences, I shall refer to the Malaysian case as the "dual-earner family model".

The dual-earner family model in Malaysia

If we benchmark progress using the official framing of gender equality i.e., women's participation in the labour market, then it would seem that Malaysia's progress is well on track. FLPR has increased steadily from 44.5% in 1982 to 55.6% in 2019 (Department of Statistics 2020). Even though FLPR is still substantially lower than male labour force participation rate in 2019 (80.8%) and slightly below the revised target of the Mid-term Review of the 11th Malaysia Plan (56.5% in 2020) (Ministry of Economic Affairs 2018), the upward trend indicates a gradual but unequivocal narrowing of the gender gap over time.

However, contrary to the official narrative, a broader normative project on gender equality would also consider the social reproductive sphere (Federici 2012; Bhattacharya 2017) and problematises social reproduction's historical but artificial separation from the productive sphere (Davis 1983). The uncritical exuberance placed on the labour market as the barometer of success has eluded the fact that women have to face the "double burden" or "second shift" of doing

unpaid care and domestic work after the first shift in the formal economy (Hochschild and Machung 2012). The Time to Care report not only confirms the double burden of women for the sample we have collected but also unveils subtler aspects of intra-household gender inequalities such as heavier mental labour and more mundane, inflexible tasks that women have to shoulder compared to men (Khazanah Research Institute 2019).

Furthermore, despite all the incentives and measures put in place to scale up private-sector care provision since the 1990s, private-sector care remains critically inadequate and unaffordable. Recent estimates of formal childcare and eldercare coverage in Malaysia, with private sector being a subset, show that formal care provisions are extremely low and only affordable to a small segment of society (Khazanah Research Institute 2019; Choong et al. 2018; World Bank 2020). Instead, the bulk of care work is provided by informal carers or family members (LPPKN 2016; World Bank 2020), usually women, which suggests an enduring, feminised process in the social reproduction of the female worker.

By situating gender inequality within the wider framing of social reproduction and production, critical perspectives can also be developed with regard to the productive sphere, especially the quality of women's participation in the labour market. Although FLPR has increased, the fastest growth has been self-employed work instead of waged work (Khazanah Research Institute 2019; Lee and Choong 2019). Self-employed work are inadvertently jobs that give flexibility to women in balancing social reproductive and productive responsibilities but lack social security and other forms of labour entitlements (Khazanah Research Institute 2019; Lee and Choong 2019). Gender gaps in multiple dimensions, namely participation, employment and wage, also increase with age, beginning around women's childbearing age and worsened for older women, indicating a gendered life-cycle effect in shaping labour market outcomes (Khazanah Research Institute 2019; Lee and Choong 2019).

In sum, by accounting for social reproduction in the assessment of the dual-earner family model in Malaysia, it not only reveals important gender inequalities in the social reproductive sphere but also points to the limits of constructing achievements only in the productive sphere.

Beyond patriarchal neoliberal capitalism

While unpaid care and gender inequality can be articulated using an economistic frame of supply and demand, especially if accompanied with the broader notion of what constitutes the economy beyond its core production boundaries (Khazanah Research Institute 2019; Choong et al. 2018; Khazanah Research Institute 2018; Lee and Choong 2019), it is crucial to situate these issues within a theorising of patriarchal neoliberal capitalism i.e., the family model has to be understood and articulated as the product of a specific form of capitalism interacting with patriarchy, to deconstruct the dual-earner family model in Malaysia more effectively (Bhattacharya 2017; Ferguson et al. 2016; Fraser 2016). Set against this backdrop, I propose three changes that need to be made to the dual-earner family model.

Expanding the role of the state in the face of an emerging care crisis

First, the neoliberal underpinnings of the minimal state must be put to question. In the Time to Care report, we have previously advocated for the introduction of a childcare allowance to promote growth of the formal childcare sector (Khazanah Research Institute 2019). It is meant to

be a shift from supply-side to demand-side subsidy, as a way to bolster the effective demand for private-sector care. The proposed allowance is attached with the condition that parents should send their children to a registered childcare centre. Although focused only on childcare, the idea is to eventually extend this to broader family benefits with similar features. The principle of fiscal neutrality guides our costing and economic simulation of the proposal, with the budgetary strategy skewed towards reallocating from other programmes rather than increasing the total allocation for subsidies and social assistance.

In retrospect, a childcare allowance packaged this way could continue to reinforce the neoliberal assumption that the state should not expand its role as a provider of care services. This is further legitimised by the ongoing health and economic crises, which have resulted in fiscal resources being reallocated to more immediate and urgent needs.

Therefore, the childcare allowance has to be envisioned differently, premised on the goal of decommodification instead. This means that the goal is not to stimulate market demand for care nor further entrench the profit motive of the private-sector care industry, but to ensure that care is provided, for those who need care and for carers themselves, regardless of market participation. More specifically, the conditionality should be removed to cover all forms of care provision beyond the narrowly defined formal care sector, with the implication that the state has to step in with an expanded role as far as funding for care is concerned. The care allowance system should also build in autonomy for women to determine their "own claim to benefits" (Women's Budget Group 2020) rather than being subsumed under households, which is often presumed to be headed by men and can engender various forms of exclusion.

Radical reimagination to make community care work

Second, despite the proposal for an expanded role of the state, it should not be misinterpreted as a call for the total outsourcing of care responsibilities to the state. On the contrary, communities should still maintain control over the organising of care work and craft localised solutions (Federici 1975; Davis 1983). Community care work can be carried out in synergy with the state in terms of the provision of care allowance as well as investments in care infrastructure, equipment and other complementary services (Aranas, Hall, and Parkes 2020).

As mentioned earlier, the bulk of care work in Malaysia is provided by informal carers or family members. In other words, communities are already organising their own care solutions amid limited public and private provisions. However, the current forms of informal care do not always take on the collective character of pooling resources to address common care needs, but they are structured as informal transactions agreed between households. Hence, informal care is predominantly located in the private domain of the households and performed "under primitive technical conditions" (Davis 1983). It is this notion of care being an individualised responsibility of women in the private domestic sphere, with all its accompanying invisibility and drudgery, that needs to be dismantled (Dalla Costa and James 1975; Davis 1983).

The Time to Care report has previously recommended a new set of childminding standards to be introduced to the large informal childcare sector in Malaysia (Khazanah Research Institute 2019). The motivation pivoted around concerns to ensure minimum quality in childminding. Another recommendation is to introduce paternity leave in the private sector to encourage more men to take up care work (Khazanah Research Institute 2019). While all these are still reasonable

demands, there is scope to design these measures beyond the remit of the privatised domestic sphere of households, to facilitating a transition from individualised domestic care to collectivised community care.

A more radical reimagining of care involves communities establishing their own care services—delivered within their communities and mobilised from their own community resources. This entails ideas such as community kitchens, shared laundrettes, volunteers for domiciliary care, spaces for self-care and respite care, and so on. Technology can be combined with social norms to remove the drudgery of domestic work and cultivate shared responsibilities between men and women in community settings (Aranas, Hall, and Parkes 2020). Working hours in formal employment may need to be made more flexible, if not shortened, to encourage participation in community care. This requires a fundamental shift in the policy mix to support the transition from a dual-earner family model to a community care model, supported by state investments that are guided by the overarching aim of decommodification.

Integrating care migration into the policy architecture

Third, the lack of labour rights for migrant women domestic workers has been a longstanding issue in Malaysia (Elias 2013; C. B. N. Chin 2003; C. B. Chin 1997). The decrease in migrant domestic workers in recent years (Khazanah Research Institute 2018) is not a manifestation of the decrease in dependencies on cheap, exploited and feminised labour from poorer countries in the region but rather a shift from a migrant-in-the-family to a migrant-in-the-market model propelled by patriarchal neoliberal capitalism. Driven by the extraction of profits, newly commodified care sectors e.g., childcare, eldercare, catering and cleaning continue to subject female migrant workers to dismal working conditions (Wahab 2020).

Care migration is one area where it can be incorporated more systematically into research on unpaid care and gender inequality, as we need more informed discourse beyond the negative rhetoric on foreign workers, especially some of the Covid-19 discourses on foreign workers that border on xenophobia (Fishbein 2020). While care migration policies are not featured in the Time to Care report and has been highlighted only briefly in a separate discussion paper (Khazanah Research Institute 2018), there is definitely more scope to establish a more comprehensive research agenda on migrant-in-the-community (as opposed to migrant-in-the-family or migrant-in-the-market) model, within the context of community care discussed earlier.

This includes extending equal benefits and entitlements to care migrant workers to ensure that they share the same socially acceptable standard of living as locals—sufficient to cover their social reproduction costs and care gaps in their home countries—as well as promoting regional-based solutions in the overall design of the care policy architecture e.g., portability of social protection benefits (Olivier 2018). This moves the gender equality agenda beyond the narrow confines of the nation state to feminised and racialised global care chains in poorer countries.

Conclusion

The imperative to pay for care work must be assessed against how patriarchy has interacted with different forms of capitalism over time in hiding, essentialising and exploiting social reproductive labour. In this paper, this assessment is situated, historically and theoretically, in the Wages for Housework campaign started in the 1970s by the International Feminist Collective. Key features

of the debate have been extracted, and their theoretical salience discussed in relation to the contemporary global crisis of care. These considerations articulate and affirm the central argument of this paper that paying for care work is inadequate to address structural invisibility and exploitation of social reproduction in the formal economy. Instead, a radical reorganising of the care economy—encompassing communities, formal economy and borders—around the end goal of decommodification, and pursued alongside both recognition and valuation as objectives, could turn wages into a more potent tool in the fight against patriarchal neoliberal capitalism.

This paper has also located the case of Malaysia within the broader discourse on wages for housework. Using lessons drawn from the wages for housework debate, I have criticised the dual-earner family model in Malaysia, which represents a gamut of policies, for its overemphasis on the productive sphere and neglect of the social reproductive sphere. I have also argued that this critique must be theorised within patriarchal neoliberal capitalism in order to derive more effective solutions and changes to the dual-earner family model in Malaysia. Therefore, framing these challenges within patriarchal neoliberal capitalism, I have put forward three broad recommendations to deconstruct the dual-earner family model i.e., expanding the role of the state, radically reorganising community care work and including care migration in the overall policy architecture. These broad recommendations are supported by more concrete suggestions based on reconsiderations of proposals from the Time to Care report and other relevant writings.

These new considerations suggest that we should broaden alliances beyond technocratic and national actors to communities and regional actors in moving these proposals forward. These new forms of collective action must be fostered and negotiated based on existing discourses, persistent conflicts and evolving contexts, all of which point to the fact that even these new considerations must be posited as tentative and subject to change. In other words, while this paper, through a reflexive process, has arrived at the suggestion for policies to support the change from a dual-earner family model to a community care model, it concludes that a reflexive space must also be forged throughout this transition and thereafter, as a way of ensuring a more sustained solution to unpaid care and gender inequality in the long run.

References

Achim Daniel Schmillen, Me Ling Tan, Amanina Binti Abdur Rahman, Shahrul Natasha Binti Halid Lnu, and Nina Weimann Sandig. 2019. 'Breaking Barriers : Toward Better Economic Opportunities for Women in Malaysia (English). The Malaysia Development Experience Series'. Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group. http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/734461569247873555/Breaking-Barriers-Toward-Better-Economic-Opportunities-for-Women-in-Malaysia.

Aranas, Mark Vincent, Sarah Hall, and Amber Parkes. 2020. 'Making Care Count: An Overview of the Women's Economic Empowerment and Care Initiative'. Oxford: Oxfam.

Baumol, William J., and William G. Bowen. 1993. Performing Arts-the Economic Dilemma: A Study of Problems Common to Theater, Opera, Music and Dance. Gregg Revivals.

Bettio, Francesca, Annamaria Simonazzi, and Paola Villa. 2006. 'Change in Care Regimes and Female Migration: The "Care Drain" in the Mediterranean'. Journal of European Social Policy 16 (3): 271–85.

Bhattacharya, Tithi. 2017. Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression. London: Pluto Press.

Chin, Christine B. N. 2003. 'Visible Bodies, Invisible Work: State Practices toward Migrant Women Domestic Workers in Malaysia'. Asian and Pacific Migration Journal 12 (1–2): 49–73. https://doi.org/10.1177/011719680301200103.

Chin, Christine BN. 1997. 'Walls of Silence and Late Twentieth Century Representations of the Foreign Female Domestic Worker: The Case of Filipina and Indonesian Female Servants in Malaysia'. International Migration Review 31 (2): 353–85.

Choong, Christopher, Theng Theng Tan, Rachel Gong, and Adam Manaf. 2018. 'Labour Market and the Shifting Landscape of Care in Malaysia: The Missing Link'. In MSC11 Proceedings: Selected Full Papers. Adya Hotel Langkawi: Bangi: Malaysia Social Science Association.

Da Roit, Barbara, and Bernhard Weicht. 2013. 'Migrant Care Work and Care, Migration and Employment Regimes: A Fuzzy-Set Analysis'. Journal of European Social Policy 23 (5): 469–86.

Dalla Costa, Mariarosa, and Selma James. 1975. The Power of Women and the Subversion of the Community. Falling Wall Press Bristol.

Dalton, George. 1965. 'Primitive, Archaic, and Modern Economies: Karl Polanyi's Contribution to Economic Anthropology and Comparative Economy'. Essays in Economic Anthropology Içinde, 1–24.

Davis, Angela. 1983. 'The Approaching Obsolescence of Housework: A Working-Class Perspective'. Women, Race, and Class, 222–44.

Del Carpio, Ximena, Rajeswari Karupiah, M. Marouani, Caglar Ozden, Mauro Testaverde, and Mathis Wagner. 2013. 'Immigration in Malaysia: Assessment of Its Economic Effects, and a Review of the Policy and System'.

Department of Statistics. 2020. 'Labour Force Survey Report 2019'. Putrajaya.

Devadason, Evelyn S., and Chan Wai Meng. 2011. 'A Critical Appraisal of Policies and Laws Regulating Migrant Workers in Malaysia'. In World Business Institute Australia, World Business and Social Science Research Conference. Hotel Istana, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Elias, Juanita. 2013. 'Foreign Policy and the Domestic Worker: The Malaysia–Indonesia Domestic Worker Dispute'. International Feminist Journal of Politics 15 (3): 391–410.

Engels, Friedrich. 2010. The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State. Penguin UK.

Esping-Andersen, Gosta. 1990. The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism. Princeton University Press.

Federici, Silvia. 1975. Wages against Housework. Falling Wall Press Bristol.

———. 2012. 'Revolution at Point Zero: Housework'. Reproduction, and Feminist Struggle. Oakland.

Federici, Silvia, Silvia Federici, Arlen Austin, and Arlen Austin. 2018. The New York Wages for Housework Committee 1972-1977: History, Theory and Documents. Autonomedia.

Ferguson, Sue, Genevieve LeBaron, Angela Dimitrakaki, and Sara R. Farris. 2016. 'Introduction: Special Issue on Social Reproduction'. Historical Materialism 24 (2): 25–37.

Fishbein, Emily. 2020. 'Fear and Uncertainty for Refugees in Malaysia as Xenophobia Escalates'. The New Humanitarian, 25 May 2020. https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news/2020/05/25/Malaysia-coronavirus-refugees-asylum-seekers-xenophobia.

Fraser, Nancy. 1994. 'After the Family Wage: Gender Equity and the Welfare State'. Political Theory 22 (4): 591–618.

———. 2016. 'Contradictions of Capital and Care'. New Left Review, no. 100: 99–117.

Graeber, David, and Albertine Cerutti. 2018. Bullshit Jobs. Simon & Schuster New York.

Harris, Olivia. 1981. 'Households as Natural Units'. Of Marriage and the Market: Women's Subordination Internationally and Its Lessons, 48–67.

Himmelweit, Susan. 2007. 'The Prospects for Caring: Economic Theory and Policy Analysis'. Cambridge Journal of Economics 31 (4): 581–99.

Hochschild, Arlie, and Anne Machung. 2012. The Second Shift: Working Families and the Revolution at Home. Penguin.

Hochschild, Arlie Russell. 2015. 'Global Care Chains and Emotional Surplus Value'. In Justice, Politics, and the Family, 249–61. Routledge.

International Monetary Fund. 2018. 'Pursuing Women's Economic Empowerment'. Washington, D.C. file:///C:/Users/christopher.choong/Downloads/pp053118pursuing-womens-economic-empowerment.pdf.

Jaffe, Sarah. 2018. 'The Factory in the Family'. The Nation (blog). 14 March 2018. https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/wages-for-houseworks-radical-vision/.

Jeffries, Fiona. 2018. 'Social Reproduction and Politics: Overcoming the Separation'. The Sociological Review 66 (3): 577–92.

Khazanah Research Institute. 2018. 'The Unsung Labour: Care Migration in Malaysia'. Kuala Lumpur: Khazanah Research Institute.

———. 2019. 'Time to Care: Gender Inequality, Unpaid Care Work and Time Use Survey'.

Kofman, Eleonore, and Parvati Raghuram. 2015. 'Sites of Reproduction, Welfare Regimes and Migrants: Unpacking the Household'. In Gendered Migrations and Global Social Reproduction, 67–99. Springer.

Lee, Hwok-Aun, and Christopher Choong. 2019. 'Inequality in Malaysia'. Journal of Southeast Asian Economies 36 (3): 329–54.

LPPKN. 2016. 'Report on Key Findings: Fifth Malaysian Population and Family Survey 2014'. Kuala Lumpur: National Population and Family Development Board.

Lutz, Helma. 2016. Migration and Domestic Work: A European Perspective on a Global Theme. Routledge.

Marx, Karl, and Friedrich Engels. 1967. 'The Communist Manifesto (1848)'. Trans. Samuel Moore. London: Penguin 15.

Ministry of Economic Affairs. 2018. 'Mid-Term Review of the Eleventh Malaysia Plan'. Putrajaya: Ministry of Economic Affairs.

Mohd, Saidatulakmal. 2012. 'Welfare Regime, Social Protection and Poverty Reduction'. In Policy Regimes and the Political Economy of Poverty Reduction in Malaysia, 107–44. Springer.

Olivier, Marius. 2018. Social Protection for Migrant Workers in ASEAN: Developments, Challenges, and Prospects. International Labour Organization.

Oran, S., and T. Bhattacharya. 2017. 'Pensions and Social Reproduction'. Social Reproduction Theory. Remapping Class, Recentering Oppression, 148–70.

Razavi, Shahra. 2007. 'The Political and Social Economy of Care in a Development Context: Conceptual Issues, Research Questions and Policy Options'. Trabajo y Empleo.

Shah, Alpa, and Jens Lerche. 2020. 'Migration and the Invisible Economies of Care: Production, Social Reproduction and Seasonal Migrant Labour in India'. Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers.

Wahab, Andika. 2020. 'The Outbreak of Covid-19 in Malaysia: Pushing Migrant Workers at the Margin'. Social Sciences & Humanities Open 2 (1): 100073.

Williams, Fiona. 2012. 'Converging Variations in Migrant Care Work in Europe'. Journal of European Social Policy 22 (4): 363–76.

Women's Budget Group. 2020. 'Creating a Caring Economy: A Call to Action'. The Commission on a Gender-Equal Economy. UK Women's Budget Group. https://wbg.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/WBG-Report-v10.pdf.

World Bank. 2012. 'World Development Report 2012 : Gender Equality and Development Cb'. Washington, D.C.: World Bank. https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/4391.

World Bank. 2020. 'A Silver Lining: Productive and Inclusive Aging for Malaysia'. Washington, D.C.: World Bank. http://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/287981606116408851/pdf/A-Silver-Lining-Productive-and-Inclusive-Aging-for-Malaysia.pdf.