

A women's worth in a pandemic ^[1]

One in three jobs held by women in the U.S. is deemed “essential” right now. Will we value that labor after the crisis has passed?

Author: Grant, Melissa Gira

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EXCERPTS

At recent protests demanding that states drop stay-home orders and other coronavirus prevention measures, events engineered for maximum viral potential on social media, a kind of paean to personal care emerged as a meme: Government overreach had denied protesters a haircut. Or getting their roots done, as one woman told reporters. These women had something like a collective demand, even if made in very bad faith: to be served.

The car-ins at which these women demonstrated, dubbed Operation Gridlock, were coordinated by a family of right-wing “scammers,” promoted by a group tied to Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos. They were de facto Trump rallies, where you could see women with American flags on their signs hanging out of their car windows to scream abuse at nurses. Alongside the more readily understood racial violence implied by Confederate flags and militia groups, these protests offered a more feminine, folksy face, doing what such faces long have in the service of white male dominion: looking like a victim.

The women at these protests don’t just want a haircut; they want the woman who likely cuts their hair to get back to work. Doing her job may put her at risk of contracting a lethal virus, and not doing it may mean she can’t pay the rent—but then again, the work was never all that secure. Whether intended or not, the protests have made service work’s precarious, feminine face more impossible to ignore, as the virus itself has. A New York Times analysis of census data and federal guidelines on “essential work” found that one in three jobs held by women in this country “has been designated as essential.” Women of color were more likely to be doing these jobs than anyone else, the same analysis found. In this way, the pandemic is a “lightning flash,” as Nancy Fraser, professor of philosophy and politics at the New School for Social Research and co-author of *Feminism for the 99%: A Manifesto*, put it in an interview with Clio Chang at Vice, “like coronavirus lights up the skies.”

Much of what’s been deemed “essential work” now is what socialist feminists have long termed social reproduction. In health care, in childcare, in education, in eldercare, and domestic work, social reproduction is the work of “life-making,” Tithi Bhattacharya, professor of history and the director of global studies at Purdue University and also a co-author of *Feminism for the 99%*, told Sarah Jaffe at Dissent. This work is undervalued because mostly women do it, and it’s mostly women who do it because it’s undervalued. What’s more: Women also devalue it, even in a pandemic.

But our current crisis of care didn’t come about because women’s work has long been both trivialized and exploited. And fixing the problem isn’t a matter of shallowly valorizing women for doing this work. “Capital, which is a huge center of power in our society, is kind of primed in its DNA to try to avoid paying for that absolutely necessary care work,” said Fraser. “A huge aspect of class struggle in the history of capitalism has been over that care work and who’s going to pay for it.”

Social reproduction, even if it’s made invisible or systematically excluded from the formal labor market, is the work that makes all work possible. This was one of the major insights of the Wages for Housework campaign, formed in 1972 by the International Feminist Collective—including Selma James and Silvia Federici—whose work reemerged in the years after the last major global financial crisis and again in our current crisis. The campaign and its vision wasn’t only about housework. James recounted, this March, that she wrote six original demands: “the right to work less; the right to have or not to have children (rather than just abortion); equal pay for all; free community-controlled nurseries and childcare (rather than 24/7 state childcare); an end to price rises; and the right to a guaranteed income, for women and men, and to wages for housework.”

These demands only feel more necessary in a crisis, and the crisis has certainly been made worse in the United States because these demands remain unrealized. For the women whose living remains dependent on showing up to perform this kind of intimate work for others, they could more easily stay home. They would not have to choose between safety and income. Even now, without such protections in place, those women workers are likely among those still staying home. People who are most burdened economically by the quarantine, according to a Kaiser Family Foundation poll released last week, support stay-at-home orders as much as those who were mostly unaffected.

The haircut demand, however in bad faith it has been made, hinges on something else: not whether that work is essential, but who gets to

demand someone else's work, and at what cost to those workers. Tressie McMillan Cottom, associate professor of sociology at Virginia Commonwealth University and the author of *Thick*, speaks to the women workers of the hustle economy, work that has long sustained women while also at times being seen as frivolous, or vain, or unnecessary. "On the one hand, women workers are concentrated in jobs deemed essential (e.g., health care and retail)," she writes. "On the other hand, the hustles that many women rely on for economic survival are deemed non-essential (e.g., beauty services, personal care work)." The coronavirus weakened the hustle economy—where women were already working with fewer protections than those in traditionally waged work, as McMillan Cottom also points out. Beauty, massage, nail care, barre classes: The question isn't who deserves these services in a pandemic but how to care for the workers who provide these services, who are no less owed safety and a living.

If income and work were severed—one of the Wages for Housework campaign's demands—this wouldn't be a question. We don't need to applaud at seven each evening for the stylists and aestheticians; we can just value the people who do that work independent of the work they do. Workers somewhere in that overlapping space between care work and service work, like sex workers, have put real strength behind this argument in recent years, as Juno Mac and Molly Smith do in *Revolt of Prostitutes*. Sex workers' demands for dignity and safety, they write, shouldn't be conditional on either "sex" or "work" being dignified, but because sex workers already have dignity and are owed safety, period. Being inessential or unsafe or bad doesn't make a job somehow not a job.

These are not new feminist demands, though they are still so often submerged in a feminism hinging on the intrinsic value of work—of getting women into "the workplace," even if that meant other women would do the less valued work that allowed those women to do so. Perhaps now that more women with those more "professional" jobs outside the care industry are doing those jobs from home, these feminist demands for solidarity with care workers will find new urgency. To live and work from home, for many women now, means something like living a collapsed first and second shift, doing your job and then the job of caring for everything (and everyone) else under your own roof. "Who's going to provide unwaged care work under these conditions?" Fraser asks of the state of care work before the pandemic. "We've been seeing this long before coronavirus came, this huge squeeze on the whole social reproductive sector." Now what?

Reassessing the value of care under the coronavirus is a risky proposition. The temptation to stake the value of care work on its being essential or worthy work is right there, facing down the demands of capitalism, which, as Bhattacharya said, is "the opposite of life-making." Capitalism is killing us—truthfully, more of us than ever before. The stakes are very high. Can you counter the weight of that by assigning a wage to now-unpaid coronavirus care work? Or, better: demand a wage to not work, and to do the work of caring on our own terms.

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