Opinion Perspective Article

Held Together by Mothers: Revaluing the Unpaid Emotional and Physical Labor of Care Work in A Neoliberal Economy, the Economy Needs What It Hides

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ABSTRACT

This perspective argues that the labor of mothering, both the physical demands of reproductive work and the invisible burden of emotional care, forms the unacknowledged foundation of economic and social life. Under neoliberalism, this labor is not simply forgotten but actively exploited, its value erased through narratives that frame care as love rather than work. The COVID-19 pandemic briefly exposed society's reliance on unpaid and underpaid caregiving, yet no structural solutions emerged. Movements like the Global Women's Strike and their Care Income Now campaign challenge this paradigm, demanding not only policy reforms but a radical redefinition of work itself; one that frames caregiving as a collective responsibility rather than a private expectation. Compensating mothering is not merely about economic justice but correcting a systemic distortion in how value is assigned. Evidence from policies like the expanded U.S. Child Tax Credit and Finland's home care allowance demonstrates that investing in caregivers reduces poverty, boosts labor participation, and improves child well-being. Drawing on the insights of Silvia Federici and the Wages for Housework movement, this argument contends that unpaid reproductive labor sustains all other forms of work. Compensation is not the commodification of love but a refusal of its exploitative nature. Recognizing mothering as labor is both an act of economic justice and a demand for structural transformation.

Keywords: Care Work; Emotional Labor; Reproductive Labor; Neoliberalism; Wages for Housework; Mothering

INTRODUCTION

"They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work." This declaration from the Wages for Housework movement recognizes how care work is essential but has systematically been denied the recognition and compensation afforded to other forms of work (1). This paper investigates the invisibility of mothering as both emotional and reproductive labor and poses the push to redefine what should be considered "work". Care work extends from physical to emotional labor required to maintain the well-being of others, including children, the elderly, the sick, and people who are not actively able to take care of themselves independently. I contend that care work is both an economic and structural necessity grounded in emotional commitment, with love and labor operating in tandem.

The labor of many mothers and care workers often

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provides support out of profound love and affection, not obligation. In fact, many respondents in the Global Women's Strike 2023 survey believed that "the bond between mother and child is vital to the welfare of the child" (2). In mother's care work, love is a vital part of that labor, however it is this emotional aspect that is used to devalue and overlook it as unpaid labor, as if love alone should be a sufficient justification for overlooked labor.

The COVID-19 pandemic made the invisibility and indispensability of mothering unmistakable, as mothers absorbed school closures and care labor shortages exposed the fragility of the U.S. economy. This worsening care crisis is driven by public underinvestment, low wages, and growing demand, resulting in a global shortfall of accessible and affordable care services. The care economy now makes up roughly a quarter of the U.S. Gross Domestic Product yet remains one of the most precarious and underprotected sectors (3). These conditions underscore my argument that mothering and care work sustain society and economy, but neoliberal systems continue to treat them as private responsibility.

In 1960, only about 20 percent of mothers worked outside the home, but today roughly 70 percent of U.S. children live in households where all adults must work (4). Combined with rising costs of living, these trends made it nearly impossible for a single income to reliably sustain a household as it might have in previous decades. These neoliberal reforms did not take into account the changing realities of family economics in the late twentieth century and created a double standard for mothers to participate in the labor market, while still providing the bulk of unpaid caregiving, with little to no public and societal support. This contradiction is a hallmark of neoliberal restructuring, in which care is privatized and made invisible even as the economy continues to rely on it to reproduce the workforce and sustain families (5). As these supports eroded, the responsibility for sustaining daily life within households fell on women, mothers, in heterosexual relationships (6). Gendered expectations that women should prioritize caregiving made them the default providers of unpaid domestic labor.

I argue that the marginalization of these labors for mothers is not accidental but structured through historical and policy shifts, particularly those stemming from neoliberal reforms. By treating care as a "free" and feminized resource, neoliberalism has deepened gendered and classed inequalities in the organization of work and society. To examine how these tensions are being challenged, the paper turns to the Global Women's Strike (GWS) and its Care Income Now campaign as a case study. Emerging from the *Wages for Housework* movement, GWS argues that recognizing and compensating care work, especially that of mothers, low-income women, and caregivers, is essential (7). Through this lens, the campaign offers not only a critique of neoliberalism, but a political proposal for how care might be revalued and re-centered in economic life.

This perspective draws on feminist political economy and dialogues with care work activists to argue that unpaid mothering is the hidden infrastructure of capitalism. I contend that care work is both an economic and structural necessity grounded in emotional commitment, with love and labor operating in tandem.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND INTELLECTUAL LINEAGE

In the current neoliberal society, many scholars have argued that neoliberalism has reframed care work, particularly mothering, as a private moral responsibility rather than socially recognized labor. Emerging in the late 20th century as a reaction to welfare states and collective labor movements, neoliberalism promotes market-based "solutions" to social needs while withdrawing public responsibility. This shift not only restructures policy but reshapes cultural expectations of motherhood. Scholar Steve Fleetwood notes that isolating the household sector creates the illusion of choice and "natural" private mothering, concealing the state's retreat from care provision. Similarly, scholars observe that the neoliberal state transfers responsibility for well-being from the collective to the individual, producing the image of an "empowered citizen" while sustaining systems of capital accumulation (8).

Feminist scholars have long challenged the historic ideology that mothering is natural or instinctive, from Enlightenment philosophy to mid-20th century psychology, arguing instead that it is politically and culturally constructed. Glenn and researchers have said that "'the oldest profession' is probably mothering," yet the expectations and meanings attached to this role have changed over time (9). In contemporary Western contexts, dominant representations tend to idealize the mother as self-sacrificing, ever available, and morally driven. Feminist Scholar Nancy Fraser identifies this

contradiction as part of capitalism's "crisis of care," in which neoliberal economies depend on reproductive and emotional labor that they simultaneously devalue and privatize. Fraser demonstrated how welfare regimes rely on the nuclear family to absorb the costs, with mothers as the default safety net (10). Mothering is work, socially regarded as a familial duty rather than compensable labor, as "love" instead of labor. As the BBC documentary *We Demand Wages for Housework* notes, it remains "the only work that isn't considered work. The only work you don't retire from. The only work you don't get wages for." (11). Understanding mothering as a form of labor, rather than a moral identity, is foundational to analyzing its dimensions and to questioning why such vital work remains excluded from mainstream economic and policy frameworks. Fraser's critiques directly support my argument that the devaluation of caregiving is a structural necessity for capitalist and neoliberal systems, which rely on women's uncompensated work to sustain economic and social order.

Mothering thus occupies a paradoxical position: it is both indispensable to the functioning of society and persistently rendered invisible by economic and policy frameworks that refuse to recognize it as work. Challenging these portrayals, *Representations of Motherhood* calls for a view of the "mother-as-subject," a real and complex figure with her own needs, limits, and social conditions (12). Mothering is thus not only an interpersonal role but is also inherently affected by political and economic ideals. It encompasses broad spectrum of labor, including reproductive labor, the physical and mental work of maintaining households and raising children—and emotional labor, the cognitive and affective effort required to sustain the family's well-being. These forms of work can be imposed through the rules and guidelines in official workplaces, but it is uncommon to be acknowledged in the private sphere in households. At home, emotional labor can look like the constant cognitive effort laced into ordinary activities like organizing a play date, calming down or maintaining the family's emotions, or even in the instinctive thoughts over their children to manage a household's emotional and logistical needs. It demands an ongoing emotional vigilance to stay attuned to the whole family's needs; emotional labor becomes a full-body, full-time form of care work that lives in the background hum of a mother. The hidden load of care work falls mostly on the shoulders of mothers who reported being responsible for about 73% of all cognitive household labor compared with their partners' 27%, and 64% of all physical household labor compared with their partners' 36% (13). I argue that these dynamics love becomes a currency of exploitation according to following Fraser's argument that neoliberalism externalizes the costs of social reproduction.

Although care work has always existed, its status and public perception have shifted sharply over the last half-century, and scholars have tracked these changes to understand how care labor came to be devalued. With industrialization and the movement of families into urban centers to find waged jobs, the emphasis on wages as the main measure of labor's value became stronger. Care work was previously more evenly distributed across families and community networks. Because work and home life were often intertwined, through farming or shared communal work, caregiving was not as sharply separated within groups (14). Work was eventually pulled out of the household context and concentrated in factories and offices, where it became waged and measurable, leading paid employment to be seen as the source of merit and social value, while the unpaid work of maintaining households and raising children was overlooked within the newly idealized nuclear family. Feminist theorists argue that this division laid the groundwork for reproductive labor to become both invisible and indispensable.

Rooted in Marxist theory Silvia Federici redefines reproductive labor "not only biological reproduction but the reproduction of labor-power," the complex of activities and relations that produce and reproduce the worker (15). Federici and other feminist thinkers argue that this labor is essential to sustaining the entire economy. Laura Briggs further expands this point by showing that reproductive labor is shaped by race, immigration policy, and poverty governance. She writes, "Welfare reform, mass incarceration, and immigration enforcement are reproductive politics: they are about controlling who has the resources to raise children and under what conditions." (16)

Arlie Hochschild's concept of emotional labor provides a crucial framework for understanding the invisible demands of mothering under neoliberalism. This truth in terms of middle-class women is captured in Hochschild's concept of "the second shift," which describes the unpaid labor women perform after their formal workday ends. Based on interviews with dual-earner couples in the 1980s, Hochschild found that women "worked roughly fifteen hours longer each week

than their husbands, adding up to an extra month of 24-hour days a year." (17). Despite participating equally in the labor market, women were still expected to be the primary caretakers at home. Hochschild writes, "When a man left work, his second shift was over. When a woman left work, her second shift began." (2). This double burden was normalized under social expectations and witnessed the increasing trend in the necessity of dual-income families. Terms such as "work-life balance" (WLB) are likewise correlated and promoted with the neoliberal state of power. Researcher Steve Fleetwood observes that WLB assumes that individuals can manage professional obligations and personal responsibilities if given the right tools or "choices." But these "choices" in actuality deflect responsibility from the state to the Individual (18). Once again, the struggle of coordination between these "two shifts" for the role of a mother will be claimed to support "choice" and "flexibility" through deregulated labor markets. Fleetwood names this process "flexibilization" and is used as an arrangement of labor "where it becomes an explicit political strategy of economic government" (18). A key aspect of this flexibilization lies in the difference between the time commitments expected of paid versus unpaid care workers.

Paid caregivers such as nannies generally operate within set hours, and boundary between work and rest. But the work of mothers are continuous without a formal "clock-in" or "clock-out". Evelyn Nakano Glenn highlights that caregiving labor is viewed as both "priceless and worthless" (19). The rhetoric of "work-life balance" thus disguises structural inequalities, portraying overwork as a matter of personal management rather than systemic design.

I argue that the constant cycle of work for mothers stretches across physical and emotional labor. Emotional labor, as defined by Arlie Hochschild in *The Managed Heart*, involves "the management of feeling to create a publicly observable facial and bodily display" that satisfies the emotional needs of others. Although Hochschild's theory originally applied to service workers in her works, the pictured concept of emotional labor has been widely extended to caregiving and motherhood, where women are expected to regulate their own emotions to meet the needs of their children, partners, and households (20). Hochschild originally characterized this definition with the service work of flight attendants who are instructed always to be smiling and polite towards the passengers, even if they are in a bad mood, to put the feelings of passengers first. I utilize her core ideas that make up emotional labor to deepen the conversation about the broader scope of care work that mothers do. Arlie Hochschild's theory of emotional labor reveals in this paper how care works invisible toil is extracted from mothers just as it is from service workers, yet without the formal recognition or wages.

I assert that the labor of mothering is systematically excluded from formal definitions of work. Welfare policy treats caregiving as secondary to waged employment, and support is often contingent on a mother's ability to conform to labor market expectations. This framework not only undervalues the work of caregiving but also structurally disadvantages those who perform it. In response, feminist thinkers and movements have proposed an alternative way to recognize and compensate care work as labor in mothering in its own right. The discussion section explores how this proposal challenges the boundaries between work and care, and I argue how emerging policies offer a pathway toward greater equity through the lens of paid labor for care work.

APPROACH AND POSITIONALITY

This research combines the structure of a case study and semi-structured interviews to explore the invisibility of mothering as emotional and reproductive labor under neoliberal economic conditions. The project takes the Global Women's Strike (GWS) and its Care Income Campaign as a case study through which to investigate alternative visions for care work recognition and compensation.

To supplement theoretical research, I conducted two interviews with women affiliated with Global Women's Strike, each offering distinct perspectives grounded in lived experience and organizing work. I first conducted a combined interview with Carolyn Hill and Pat Albright, organizers within GWS and Every Mother is a Working Mother Network, who shared insights around welfare policy and their own advocacy with maternal labor. Their reflections helped underscore the critical necessity in welfare policies for low-income communities. Hearing their experiences made me question what it would take for policy to account for both the economic necessity and the ethical and emotional dimensions of care.

Later, as I interviewed Peggy O'Mara, longtime editor of *Mothering* magazine and a participant in GWS's 2023 global caregiving survey, I was struck by how she wove love and political consciousness together. Our conversation centered on cultural shifts in how care

work is perceived, the emotional labor of motherhood, and her process in joining and standing with GWS. Her reflections helped situate the dimensions of care within broader structural and ideological frameworks. Peggy helped me see that translating theory into activism begins with acknowledging care as a practice of love that carries political weight. Her insights guided me to reconsider my own position, as a women, advocate, and daughter, within these structures.

These interviews, conducted via Zoom in summer 2025 with informed consent, were approximately sixty minutes each and transcribed digitally.

DISCUSSION

Mothering as Economic Infrastructure

"To say that we want wages for housework is to expose the fact that housework is already money for capital," wrote Silvia Federici. "Capital has made and makes money out of our cooking, smiling, fucking." (21). This radical claim from Wages for Housework rethinks caregiving not as an extension of motherhood or love, but as labor that sustains the economy, and is invisible precisely because it is unpaid. Mothering is labor that is essential to reproducing society itself yet is treated as a private choice or moral identity. I argue that mothering, which encompasses both reproductive and emotional labor, is not only work but the very infrastructure of life under capitalism. It is only through mothering and care work that the future labor force is raised, current workers are supported, and households can function. To refuse to recognize it as labor is to perpetuate a system that extracts value from mothers without compensation, particularly from single, working-class, and racialized mothers who lack safety nets or flexible job conditions.

The COVID-19 pandemic temporarily forced a cultural reckoning, but it did not deliver the structural recognition or compensation that care workers deserve. Still, it illuminated a longstanding reality: mothers, even when unpaid, are doing the very same work as those recognized and compensated as "essential." Mothers were thrust into a dual role with schools and childcare centers closed, and took on the full-time responsibilities of educators, caregivers, and emotional anchors, often while juggling paid employment or navigating job loss. According to the Center for American Progress, nearly 1.2 million mothers left the workforce between February 2020 and February 2021(1). While care professionals were considered "essential," mothers were still largely expected to absorb this increased labor without recognition or support, just an expectation. This burden was especially acute for families who had previously relied on formal childcare services to balance work and family responsibilities (21). Low-income families and single mothers with no secondary income or backup care to rely on revealed the fragile infrastructure of the care economy. One recent report found that for every 10 paid caregivers who leave the workforce, one unpaid worker (usually a mother) must leave another job to backfill that care (22).

The pandemic didn't create this dynamic in the so-called "care crisis"; it only made visible the economic model that had always depended on women's unpaid and underpaid labor to hold society together. I assert that we must reconsider how society defines "work" and who counts as a worker. In the Global Women's Strike 2023 survey, 84% of respondents said they believe their care work as a mother or family caregiver contributes to society and should be paid (2). Moreover, 40% of mothers said they felt less valued by society after becoming a parent. These findings highlight a widespread desire for not only practical support but also recognition. If the state depends on this labor to function, then compensating caregivers, especially mothers, is not just a moral imperative, but an economic one. Time and time again, the care industry has proven itself to be the economy's foundation. As Laura Briggs argues, we don't have a childcare crisis but a policy crisis (16). The care crisis should not fall on the shoulders of individual mothers and the private sector; we need to address the system itself for a productive change.

When Love Becomes Labor: Mothering is a Full Time Job

Mothering must be recognized as labor precisely because love should never be used as a substitute for social support or as a justification for poverty. Valuing the work of mothering affirms both its economic and social necessity without diminishing the love that motives care. Peggy says, "Nobody would do the work that you're doing for free unless they were the mother." It is the complete idea that if a family were to outsource the care work for themselves, such as common nannies or daycare, someone else would pay for it. So the argument is, why shouldn't a mother performing the same tasks also get paid for it? Love and affection do not erase the fact that it is labor, both physically and emotionally demanding. Recognizing mothering as labor means accounting for its full scope. The physical tasks of caregiving for children, such as feeding, are

more visible, but the emotional and cognitive labor it requires, even in the academic world, is another division that is not as commonly mentioned. Carolyn, in our interview, recalled being introduced to a workshop on "measuring your time" spent doing unpaid care. But as she put it: "To me it isn't none. Because you're working 24/7. If you have children, you're around the clock. People come out of their homes. Go to another home. And clean and take care of their kids. Even though we should clean our own house first. "

Carolyn's words highlight the irony of care work where neoliberal ideas of "work-life balance" (WLB) reveal these contradictions; it becomes a matter of private choice rather than public responsibility. The state transfers "responsibility for well-being, from the state to the individual," promoting the image of a "free, empowered individual" who can make decisions about childcare and work-life balance (WLB) within a so-called flexible labor market (18). However, this flexibility is not neutral; it "can be seized on by capital as a handy way to procure more flexible means of accumulation," extracting greater productivity while externalizing the costs of care onto families, particularly women. The narrative of self-sustaining and making sure familial care work "fits" within the structures of the public sphere is yet another way emotional labor is offloaded onto women.

The lack of recognition for mothering as work, especially as a constant and daily one, has fueled justifications for its lack of compensation. Unlike paid care professions, such as teaching or nursing, where the added layer of emotional involvement may enhance performance but remains optional, mothering demands constant emotional and physical labor as its very foundation which is one of the reasons why mothers can be considered working 24/7. Teachers can clock out; nurses rotate shifts. Mothers cannot. Yet modern economic systems treat these roles differently, attaching wages and protections to the former while erasing the latter from economic metrics altogether. Modern economic systems draw a stark line between paid and unpaid labor, dictated by the attached wages, which in turn creates a misleading picture of productivity. This devaluation has allowed states and employers to benefit from unpaid care work without bearing its costs (23). But beyond institutional oversight, the invisibility of household labor is also maintained by powerful cultural norms. As recent research argues, when caregiving is framed as an extension of love, it becomes easier for employers and governments to avoid compensating it (24). These norms reinforce a structural imbalance and can serve as a form of monopsony power, where employers or institutions push wages down by presenting labor as an extension of civic or familial obligation, not as work. The law, too, struggles to address this ambiguity. In the United States, foundational labor legislation such as the Fair Labor Standards Act leaves terms like "work" and "employ" undefined (25). As a result, much of the labor that sustains households and communities, including mothering, remains economically uncounted and legally unprotected. This distinction between paid and unpaid labor can be used as a structural tool for preserving unequal distributions of value, visibility, and power.

This "around-the-clock" way of working highlights the constant mental load, worry, and affective regulation involved in being a mother. "To me, it didn't make sense to separate out the two," Hackman says. "If anything, it hurt the overall point. We don't call physical labor in private something different from physical labor for a fee."(26). Physical and emotional labor are not separate domains but mutually reinforcing processes. Yet because emotional labor is harder to quantify, it is often overlooked in economic and policy frameworks that measure labor by output, like wages, rather than relational impact. Instead, we should look at how physical and emotional labor go hand-in-hand for care work.

The Emotional Dimension of Labor

This function matters because emotional labor, like physical care work, takes a toll. Both kinds of labor can alienate the worker from herself, whether it is her body or "the margins of the soul" being used to serve another (26). Peggy defines emotional labor as ever-present "That makes you think about your kids all the time. Not even when you're not there, not when you're not doing that work… and isn't that true of anyone you love". She acknowledges the difficulty at first to understand compensating mothers because they're "not doing it for money. So how can you justify that you get money for that?" However, she notes that if this work were performed by anyone other than the mom, someone would be paid to do it, highlighting how society only recognizes labor when it is removed from the home, outside the private domain in neoliberal terms. The paradox of it is that the fundamental work of raising healthy children to create a healthy society is rendered invisible. This invisibility can be most clearly revealed in the early years of a child's life, sometimes

called the attachment period in the first three to five years, in which they develop conscience and the ability to regulate emotions. I assert that emotional labor is hence not simply sentimental, but neurologically and psychologically foundational. Harvard's Center on the Developing Child emphasizes that "responsive relationships with caregivers are the most important factor in building strong brain architecture." (27).

Compensating mothers for the labor they perform in raising children has been a central demand of feminist movements that seek to redefine work itself. The COVID-19 pandemic laid bare a truth long obscured: caregiving is not optional, but essential. Millions of care professionals, such as nannies and babysitters, were newly recognized as "essential workers" and acknowledged as foundational to the functioning of society (28). As Peggy O'Mara noted in our interview, "During the pandemic, people saw that those taking care of kids and helping with schooling at home… were sort of essential workers, you know, how could we even live without them?" Teachers, childcare workers, and the care work they do were suddenly at the center of public conversation, not because their roles had changed, but because the world finally noticed the cruciality in their work for the new generation, and the basic functioning of the current. Yet this recognition was incomplete. Public attention largely focused on the physical tasks of caregiving needed to be handled during the pandemic, but overlooks the deep emotional labor that mothers carried to sustain their families through the crisis of fears with an ongoing virus.

Emotional labor is what makes the difference between a child who is merely supervised and one who feels safe and supported; It is what shapes the care recipient's environment. The effectiveness of caregiving depends not only on the completion of physical tasks but on the affective relationship that underpins them. If we were to look at the needs of a care recipient, their crucial well-being is always nurtured with a care-givers emotional labor. To exclude this labor from definitions of work because it is grounded in love is to ignore its function and impact for the care recipient. I believe the Global Women's Strike makes this point undoubtedly clear. When love becomes a justification for unpaid labor, care becomes a site of extraction. This organization's demands are not merely a call for economic justice, but for a redefinition of labor itself. One that includes the affective and embodied demands of caregiving as essential to both the caregiver and the care recipient.

Global Women's Strike: Reclaiming Value

The Global Women's Strike (GWS) emerged in 2000 as an international feminist movement demanding recognition and remuneration for all forms of caregiving labor (29). Its roots lie in the Wages for Housework campaign of the 1970s, a radical initiative led by Selma James. James, a British activist and writer, launched the campaign after working closely with the welfare rights movement in the United States. The wages for housework campaigns grew out of the welfare rights movement.

From the start, the campaign sought to reframe housework and caregiving across all economic classes (30). Wages for Housework was unique in its explicit challenge to both capitalism and traditional feminist frameworks. It rejected the idea that liberation for women meant simply joining the waged labor force. Instead, it asked why the labor women already performed remained unwaged and devalued. The campaign insisted on exposing how much capitalism depends on free care work, making it especially relevant today.

The GWS agenda is to politicize the unpaid labor historically relegated to the private sphere (31). By targeting caregiving as a political category, not just a social or familial one, the movement exposes the economic system's repeated reliance on invisible labor. They have translated their political vision into tangible action for decades, intervening in both national and international policymaking. As Pat Albright recalled in our interview, the original Wages For Housework campaign group played a pivotal role at the 1977 National Women's Conference in Houston, Texas, then the first and only federally funded women's conference in U.S. history. There, Wages for Housework activists joined with the Welfare Rights Movement to overthrow a resolution that would have endorsed President Jimmy Carter's workfare proposal (32). In its place, they helped pass a new resolution that declared mothers receiving income transfer payments or welfare should have the dignity of that money called a wage. The proposal laid the groundwork for later advocacy efforts and brought more political momentum. It functioned more as a political statement and call to action, shifting language and values across communities.

Moreover, the 1977 conference delegation was notably led by Black women, including Margaret Prescod, co-founder of Black Women for Wages for Housework. Formed just a year earlier in 1976 by Prescod and Wilmette Brown, the group within WFH

emerged to address the campaign's racial gaps by arguing that work for them included far more than childcare, but also the act of protecting their families from violence during a time of constant police surveillance and intentionally underfunded public systems. Wilmette Brown, for example, wrote about the toll of living near chemical plants in Newark and the unpaid care work of surviving environmental racism (33). In contrast to the broader Wages for Housework campaign, which often focused on the nuclear household, Black Women for Wages for Housework expanded the category of care to include the movement with interactions of race and class. The emotional labor required to protect and sustain families under racial capitalism is hence argued as a form of survival work. In the mid-1970s, Black mothers carried the psychological weight of shielding their children without institutional support in a hostile world. The labor of daily mothering with an added layer of pressured survival was and remains relevant and hard in a society actively retaliating against systemic racism. Women of color require a distinct form of emotional labor that fills in the insufficiencies left by the state economically and historically.

The advocacy of Black Women for Wages for Housework highlighted a critical factor in how marginalized communities face a compounded load of care work. For welfare recipients and working-poor single mothers, caregiving was not just invisibilized but actively weaponized. Welfare recipients must meet caregiving demands under conditions that actively undermine their ability to do so. The 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA) marked a turning point by tying benefits to strict work requirements and promoting marriage as a route out of poverty (34). PRWORA instituted Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), which imposed strict work requirements as a condition of receiving public benefits (35). Mothers were required to work a minimum number of hours per week, often in low-wage jobs to qualify for even minimal assistance.

In many cases, this meant that mothers were often forced to leave children as young as six weeks old in order to meet eligibility thresholds. For these mothers, the available benefits that are meant to help them essentially reframe mothering as an economic liability unless accompanied by paid employment. TANF benefits are also time-limited and subject to state discretion, meaning that women who fail to comply with work requirements may be sanctioned or lose benefits entirely, regardless of their caregiving responsibilities or access to childcare. There is also added concern for some mothers regarding the availability and affordability of childcare security in order to meet work requirements. This cycle traps mothers in a bind where unpaid care work disqualifies them from benefits, while the jobs available to them rarely pay enough to afford care.

For single mothers, the stakes are completely dependent on them. Unlike two-parent households, they cannot rely on a second paycheck to buffer economic insecurity. Without adequate public support, they are forced to navigate both wage work and caregiving alone, often under surveillance and the threat of benefit sanctions and may end up dealing with the added difficulties of manipulative welfare programs. As of 2023, there are 7.3 million single mothers in the U.S.(1). In 2022, single mothers working full-time earned a median annual income of just $40,000, compared to $57,000 for single fathers (3). Racial disparities were even starker as Black and Hispanic single mothers earned $38,000 and $34,000, respectively. The poverty rate among single mothers stands at 28%, nearly double that of single fathers (15%) and significantly higher than that of married couples (5%) (36). Emotional labor is not ancillary to caregiving but central to how marginalized mothers keep their families afloat. For mothers already navigating systematic invisibility, the lack of resources or help presented to them, love has to be labor-intensive. Mothers who are outside the nuclear family model may only have the consistency of their care work as an emotional backbone for their family.

Beyond the U.S., GWS and their wages for housework movement has also worked to institutionalize the recognition of unpaid labor at the international level. At the 1995 United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, they successfully pushed for a resolution calling for the economic value of women's work "in the home, on the land, and in the community" to be measured and included in national accounting systems (37). More recently, the Strike has supported legislative efforts like Congresswoman Gwen Moore's bill to redefine "work" in the U.S. tax code so that unpaid caregivers and low-income student parents can qualify for the Earned Income Tax Credit, even without formal income (38).

Launched in 2020, the Care Income Now Campaign builds on these progressions to demand more specifically compensation. The campaign calls for a "care income" that would be provided to all caregivers, including

mothers, family members caring for the elderly or disabled, and community-based carers (31). Unlike policies such as the Child Tax Credit, which are framed as benefits for dependents, the care income explicitly positions caregiving as socially necessary work that warrants direct remuneration. The Care Income puts the act of mothering and caregiving as a job in its own right. As GWS frames it, this proposal "redefines what is considered productive work," challenging the economic models that exclude reproductive and emotional labor from measures of value. The campaign is also profoundly intersectional and global in its scope, revealing how women of all standings bear the brunt of unpaid care work, often under exploitative conditions. Through international organization and coalition-building, GWS has worked to make the care income demand visible from local governments to the United Nations. In 2020, they issued an open letter signed by over 80 organizations and prominent figures, calling for governments to prioritize caregiving and environmental sustainability over militarization and profit (39). The care income proves that what GWS stands for is social support and intervention for human and planetary survival. Importantly, the campaign also includes demands for those who care for the land and natural resources, broadening the definition of caregiving ecologically. The Care Income Now campaign is not a static demand but a living struggle, shaped by the experiences and insights of those on the frontlines. As Carolyn Hill reflects, "I just started learning a lot of stuff. And I'm still learning, you know." This ongoing learning underscores the nature of the movement that people should strive for, one that continues to adapt for the involved care industry.

In choosing GWS as a case study, this paper highlights a movement that not only demands compensation for caregiving labor but insists on transforming the broader economic and political systems that have long leveraged it. As Peggy O'Mara puts it, "The strike is actually very anti-capitalist… What has to happen in order for us to appreciate care is, and I think this is what the strike is trying to do, to redefine work. What is work?" I argue that this is what makes GWS relevant to today's care crisis: it places unpaid labor at the center of any discussion about economic justice. In an era where governments continue to promote "flexibility" and "choice" while pulling back from care infrastructures, the GWS reminds us that the stakes are extended to the redistribution of recognition.

Investing in Care: Structural Recognition

In 2021, the temporary expansion of the Child Tax Credit (CTC) offered a glimpse of what it might look like to materially support caregiving work. The policy increased the maximum credit amount, made it fully refundable, and delivered monthly payments to families (40). The results were immediate and significant, where child poverty fell by more than 40% within six months of implementation, and families reported using the funds to pay for food, rent, and child-related expenses like childcare and school supplies. The success of the expanded CTC offers clear evidence that investing in caregivers yields not only moral but also economic returns. It relieved financial strain on low and middle-income families, supported workforce participation (especially among women), and injected spending into local economies. Yet the program was allowed to expire in December 2021, despite widespread public approval.

Care employment already accounts for a significant share of global labor, estimated by the International Labor Organization (ILO) at 11.5% of all employment. By 2030, the world will need an estimated 475 million more care jobs to meet basic demand (41). The World Economic Forum emphasizes that meeting human development goals will require "large-scale investments in care-related sectors—specifically in early education, healthcare, and family caregiving" (42). In the United States alone, the Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts that employment of home health and personal care aides is projected to grow 21 percent from 2023 to 2033, much faster than the average for all occupations (43). These numbers make one thing clear: care work and its industry is an economic engine that is worth investing in. Other nations have other financial solutions for supporting parents. Finland, for example, offers a model of state investment in care through its *home care allowance* system (*kotihoidon tuki*) (44). Parents of children under the age of three can receive a monthly stipend if they choose to care for their child at home, rather than using public daycare. The base amount is around €350 per month, and it can be supplemented depending on family income, the number of children, and the municipality. This benefit not only offers financial relief but also affirms that the act of parenting itself is socially necessary work, not merely a private choice. Unlike benefits or welfare programs previously mentioned, Finland's approach does not penalize mothers for not participating in waged labor. By investing directly in families, Finland improves child development outcomes and reduces stress on

working parents.

The case of Wages for Housework and its continued momentum in the Global Women's Strike (GWS) makes a crucial distinction that, unlike benefits framed around dependents, the Care Income campaign repositions caregiving to be directly compensated. This paper presents this campaign as especially important in bringing emotional labor into the conversation, naming caregiving as an active form of economic participation. The movement's strength lies in its refusal to separate love from labor and understand the recognition and power behind the act of compensation. As Louise Toupin writes, "in order to change their situation of dependency, reverse the relations of power, and redistribute the wealth that they produced." (45). This framing distinguishes it from other reforms like subsidized childcare or tax credits, which, while helpful, in technicality still operate within the logic that only market labor is economically valuable. I believe what makes the Wages for Housework movement lineage, including campaigns like the Care Income Now initiative, so radical is that it challenges the very definitions of work that could include physical and emotional labor. Rather than bending mothers and caregivers to fit into the current economic model, they demand a cultural and political shift that refuses to treat love as a substitute for justice, in addition to policy and benefit changes.

CONCLUSION

The labor of mothering, encompassing both the physical demands of reproductive work and the invisible burden and lasting presence of emotional labor, is the unacknowledged foundation of economic and social life. Yet under neoliberal capitalism, this work remains systematically devalued, extracted without compensation, and obscured by narratives of love or moral obligation. The COVID-19 pandemic briefly exposed the fragility of this arrangement, revealing how deeply society relies on unpaid and underpaid caregiving while offering no structural solutions. Movements like the Global Women's Strike and their Care Income Now campaign challenge this paradigm, demanding not just policy reforms but a radical redefinition of work itself. Their vision insists that caregiving is not a private responsibility but a collective one, labor that sustains the present and future workforce.

The case for compensating mothering is not merely about economic justice for individuals but about correcting a systemic distortion in how value is assigned. When care work is excluded from economic metrics, when welfare policies penalize mothers for prioritizing their children, and when emotional labor is dismissed as "natural," the result is not just inequality but the active destabilization of the very households and communities that uphold society. The success of temporary measures like the expanded Child Tax Credit and international models like Finland's home care allowance demonstrates that investing in caregivers yields measurable benefits, reducing poverty, strengthening labor force participation, and improving child well-being.

Ultimately, recognizing mothering as labor is about more than wages but about power. It rejects the neoliberal logic that treats care as a cost to be minimized rather than the essential infrastructure it is. As Silvia Federici and the Wages for Housework movement argued decades ago, the unpaid labor of reproduction is what allows all other labor to exist. Redefining work needs to include how essential physical and emotional labor are for care recipients, and how these two operations are intertwined to work. To compensate, it is not to commodify love but to refuse the exploitation disguised by it. The Care Income Now campaign, like the broader feminist movements it builds upon, does not seek to assimilate caregiving into the existing market but to transform the market to center care. In a world facing crises of inequality, this reorientation is urgent. The question is no longer whether care work has value, but who will finally pay for it. Recognizing mothering as labor is not an act of charity but a declaration that the economy must finally pay its oldest and most essential workers. To pay for caregiving is not radical; it is overdue. And we must take these first steps towards redefining labor itself.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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