

Feminist Perspectives on Social Policy – Global Conversations

An Introduction to the Themed Issue

Ingela K. NAUMANN¹

University of Fribourg, Switzerland

The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, across highly diverse socio-political and economic contexts, placed renewed emphasis on a persistent and globally shared reality: the endurance of gender inequalities. The pandemic not only intensified existing disparities in health outcomes, access to healthcare, employment, income security, and exposure to gender-based violence, but also made visible the centrality of care work and social reproduction for the functioning of economies and societies (Naumann et al. 2022). At the same time, recent years have been marked by growing political contestation over women's rights, including restrictions on reproductive rights and access to education, alongside the rise of anti-gender discourse. These developments underline the urgency of revisiting feminist perspectives on social policy in a global context.

Gender inequality remains one of the most pervasive and structurally embedded forms of social inequality worldwide. Despite significant advancements in education and formal rights, women continue to experience lower labour market participation, higher levels of precarious employment, and persistent wage gaps. At the same time, women perform a disproportionate share of unpaid domestic and care work, and when paid and unpaid work are combined, often work longer hours than men. Inequalities are further evident in access to healthcare, exposure to violence, and representation in political and economic decision-making (Chancel et al. 2026). Importantly, these patterns do not follow a linear trajectory towards equality; rather, they reflect ongoing tensions between expansion of rights and processes of retrenchment and backlash, as recently witnessed regarding the curtailing of abortion rights in the USA, and drastic reduction of women's civil and social rights in Afghanistan.

Feminist scholarship has long demonstrated that these inequalities are not merely outcomes of markets or cultural norms but are deeply embedded within social policy arrangements. Early feminist analyses of welfare states in the Global North highlighted how policies reproduce gen-

¹ Ingela Naumann (ingela.naumann@unifr.ch) is Professor of Social Policy, Social Work and Sociology at the Department of Social Work, Social Policy and Global Development, University of Fribourg.



dered divisions of labour through normative assumptions about gender roles and responsibilities with respect to family care and gainful employment. Pateman (1988), for example, highlighted how modern welfare states in their policy design replicated patriarchal structures by transferring women's dependency from the male breadwinner to the state. Fraser (1994) further highlighted how modern welfare states encompassed a gendered two-tier system with a hierarchy between more generous employment-related contributions vis-a-vis more basic social assistance benefits. Women, generally having a weaker link to the labour market due to care responsibilities, were found predominantly in receipt of this less extensive form of welfare provision (Fraser 1994). At the end of the 20th century, a strong consensus emerged in "Northern" feminist scholarship and activism, that the key to women's equality with men lay in the creation of "women-friendly" social policies (Hernes 1987) that would alleviate women's care burdens and enable women to fully participate in the labour market, by means of work/family reconciliation policies such as parental leave and childcare schemes (Sainsbury 1996). More recent work has extended this analysis to critically interrogate the implications of neoliberal restructuring and the economisation of care that enhances a focus on the "adult worker model" however, without addressing societally embedded gender norms around care, and with persistent uneven distributions of welfare responsibilities across states, markets, families, and communities (Daly 2011).

However, while rich feminist scholarship on social policy has emerged in recent decades, the global scope of feminist social policy analysis remains uneven. Much of the literature continues to be anchored in the experience of women in welfare states in Europe, North America, and other high-income regions (Roberts/Connell 2016). Where research engages with contexts in the Global South and post-socialist regions, theorizing from the "North" is often seen as blueprint onto which empirical Global South studies are mapped onto (Razavi/Staab 2018). As a result, the diversity of feminist thought and practice across different historical, political, and cultural contexts is insufficiently reflected in dominant debates.

This *Themed Issue* takes a different approach. It brings together four contributions that are theoretically and empirically grounded in diverse geopolitical contexts of the Majority World—international post-colonial debate; perspectives from Latin America, Southeast Asia, and the Western Balkans—while drawing on feminist theoretical traditions that emerge from, or engage deeply with, these contexts. Rather than mapping these cases onto "canonical" academic discourses and conceptual frameworks of the "Northern core" (Béland/Mahon 2016), such as questions of "decommodification", "de-familialisation", "welfare regimes" or "gender regimes" (just to mention a few), the articles in this *Themed Issue* are placed in dialogue with one another to explore how feminist perspectives informed by diverse global intellectual traditions and critical thinking provide a critical lens for examining specific configurations of power, inequality, and institutional arrangements.

Across these diverse settings, the contributions to this *Themed Issue* reveal a shared concern with the gendered organisation of care and social reproduction, and the ways in which this is embedded within both formal and informal systems of welfare provision. Whether mediated through state policies, labour market arrangements, or family and community relations, gendered assumptions about care work—paid and unpaid—emerge as a central mechanism through which gender inequalities are reproduced.

Feminist claims for women's labour market participation and economic equality in developed countries has led to a strong focus by gender-sensitive social policy research on the way "care" is organised in modern welfare states and how different "care regimes" structure women's labour market participation (Bettio/Plantenga 2004). "Care" in this strand of social policy literature is mainly understood as a person-centred activity aimed at supporting the physical health and safety, and cognitive and emotional skills of the care recipients (Daly/Lewis 2000). The relational aspect of care has been further emphasized by the feminist ethics of care literature (Tronto 1993; Sevenhuijsen 2003).

Researchers working from a Global South perspectives have criticized that this person-centred, relational conceptualization of care sidelines other aspects of "care-taking", particularly domestic work, that is a set of basic activities such as cleaning or meal preparation on the basis of which personal care-giving can be carried out. In the Majority World, these aspects of care work are vital for understanding the challenges and constraints to women's equality and well-being, considering the time and effort it can take for basic activities such as fetching water or preparing meals without the infrastructure and amenities available in high-income countries. As Razavi and Staab (2018: 83) point out: "domestic work continues to absorb a significant proportion of women's time" especially in low-income countries where basic social infrastructure such as water, electricity and sanitation may be lacking.

In addition, it has been argued, that the exclusion of "domestic" or "homework" from the "care" concepts ignores the experiences of poor women and women of colour, who often are employed as "domestic workers" in the households of high-income women—be it in the Global South or Global North—thereby propping up "first world" women's labour market participation (Duffy 2005). "Care work" in its broad conceptualization is thus not an innocent concept, referring only to "love-based", intimate and relational aspects of human existence, but a highly political one: it elucidates class-based, racial and gendered global hierarchies and power relations.

This is the starting point of the article of Anukriti Dixit, Muneeb UI Lateef Bandy and Jovita dos Santos Pinto. Informed by a feminist postcolonial perspective and drawing on Bacchi's (2009) "What's the Problem Represented to be?"-approach, the article examines how international discourse shaped by organizations such as ILO, the World Bank or UN, differentiate between different forms of labour, with the examples of 'working from home' and "domestic labour". Their analysis shows that global policy narratives frame 'working from home' as flexible, productive, and modern, while domestic work—typically performed by women in private households—is represented as informal, deficient, or residual. This problem representation reflects historically embedded gendered, racialised, caste-based, and colonial hierarchies in the valuation of labour. By foregrounding how policy discourses construct domestic work as a 'lesser' form of labour, the authors demonstrate how processes of social reproduction are depoliticised, and the private household is reaffirmed as an intimate rather than political space. In doing so, the article highlights the entanglement of Global North and Global South labour regimes and argues for recognising the home as a workplace and domestic work as skilled labour within a global political economy structured by inequality.

Yamila Pita in this *Themed Issue* takes up another social policy issue that has been central in feminist scholarly debate on social policy in the Global South but neglected in "Northern"

scholarly discourse: the importance of conditional cash transfers (CCTs) in relation to care responsibilities in developing welfare states (Molyneux 2007). CCTs are usually child-related cash-transfers that are not linked to formal employment and mostly directed at women, in the assumption that mothers will best support children's interests and wellbeing. These schemes are widespread in Latin America and also exist in African and Asian nations (Razavi/Staab 2018). They are sometimes universal, sometimes targeted, and present a form of state welfare that differs in its logic from the social insurance-oriented social protection schemes in the Global North. CCTs respond to social welfare concerns in contexts where much of gainful employment takes place in the informal sector, meaning large parts of the population, particularly women, have no access to formal social protection schemes. Thus, CCTs can be an important source of social security for women.

However, in her article, Pita demonstrates that the effects of these social policy programmes can be ambivalent. She examines Argentina's Universal Child Allowance as a form of care policy through a feminist political economy of care perspective, drawing on the concepts of familialisation and the social organisation of care. Grounded in qualitative empirical evidence, the article shows that while the policy provides important income support, it reinforces a gendered division of labour by positioning women as primary caregivers and attaching conditionalities linked to childcare responsibilities. Particularly in the context of often insufficient and fragmented social infrastructure (such as health care or public transport), conditional cash benefits can trap women in informal carer roles and create barriers for their engagement in the labour market. This dual dynamic reflects broader feminist critiques of conditional cash transfer programmes, which simultaneously address poverty while reproducing gendered responsibilities within households. By situating the policy within wider welfare and care regimes, the article highlights how state interventions can contribute to the redistribution of resources without challenging the underlying gendered allocation of care work.

Another lesson that can be drawn from the contributions in this *Themed Issue* is about the important, yet ambivalent position, of informal care systems in the provision of social welfare. Feminist discourse on social policy globally, has pointed to the role of the state in supporting women's welfare and gender equality through state social policies. Nevertheless, a common theme in feminist social policy debate internationally is the acknowledgement of the centrality of informal care and social reproductive work by families and communities, which at large, means care work provided by women. In Global North contexts, informal care work is either discussed critically as a "stop gap" in view of insufficient social services provisions, or alternatively as a welcome space for individual/family "choice" with respect to care arrangements, depending on the perspective. In Global South contexts however, it is widely acknowledged, that informal family and community care—mostly provided by women—constitutes the bedrock of welfare provision in the absence of a more comprehensive organization of state-welfare policy. From this perspective, informal care does not inhabit a space of choice as might be invoked by a liberal feminist welfare imaginary but constitutes the foundation of societal welfare provision. As such, informal care is deeply imbued with social norms and embedded in societal hierarchies and power structures.

Ruth Vollmer's research on the experiences of migrant women's return home to Western Balkan states and their positioning within informal social protection systems provides strong

testimony to the powerful levers of informal care/social protection systems, both in their capacity to support individual wellbeing, as well as in subduing individuals into hierarchical power and gender relations. Against the backdrop of receding state socialist social policies during the Westward transition of the Western Balkan countries, Vollmer examines how this shift from a formal to an informal care regime has affected women returning from employment migration abroad. Drawing on a social constructivist ‘doing gender’ framework, conceptualising gender as an ongoing process that structures social relations and access to resources, Vollmer shifts attention from institutional design to the relational dynamics through which social protection is enacted within families and transnational networks. The findings show that informal social protection is negotiated through gendered norms and expectations, producing patterns of protection, adverse inclusion, and exclusion. This approach highlights the ambivalent role of family-based systems: while they can provide crucial support in contexts of weak formal welfare provision, they also reproduce power hierarchies and dependency relationships. By linking micro-level interactions with broader structural transformations, including welfare retrenchment and migration, the article demonstrates how gender is actively constituted within systems of informal social protection.

The fourth contribution to this *Themed Issue* deals with the gendering norms and practices of education systems. The furthering of gender equality in education is a global success story: today, worldwide, more girls than ever have access to formal education; with girls’ participation in primary education basically matching that of boys’ education worldwide. Increasing numbers of young girls and women also enter secondary and tertiary education globally – and with a trend of girls outperforming boys in education. However, in the Global South, irrespective of the strong performance of girls in primary and partly secondary education, when it comes to tertiary education, women increasingly drop out again—not least due to care responsibilities and societal expectations of their gender roles (Bonfert/Wadhwa 2024). This is where the article of Nikita Sharma and Asma Zulfiqar makes a strong contribution by demonstrating how education policies in Pakistan, even where they follow gender-inclusive/gender-neutral orientations, may lead to reproducing gender stereotypes and limit girls’ aspirations if deeper societal ideas and norms as presented by school curriculums are not questioned and revised.

Drawing on an ecological systems framework that links macro-level policy discourse with meso- and micro-level institutional and everyday practices, Sharma and Zulfiqar analyse how education policy and curricular practices shape gender norms and aspirations in Pakistan. The analysis reveals a disjuncture between formal commitments to gender equality and the reproduction of gendered expectations in textbooks and schooling environments. By conceptualising education as a site of socialisation embedded within broader socio-cultural and institutional contexts, the article demonstrates how policy operates not only through formal regulation but through the transmission of norms and representations. This ecological perspective highlights the multi-layered processes through which gendered aspirations are produced, showing how schooling can simultaneously expand opportunities while reinforcing normative assumptions about gender roles, work, and care.

Building on these contributions, the *Themed Issue* highlights the fundamentally ambivalent nature of social policy in relation to gender equality. On the one hand, social policies can provide crucial resources, recognition, and institutional support that enhance women’s autonomy

and wellbeing—whether through income transfers, labour regulation, educational access, or systems of social protection. On the other hand, these same policies can simultaneously reproduce and stabilise gendered inequalities when they remain grounded in unexamined assumptions about care, family roles, and women’s responsibilities. Dixit et al. show how policy discourses devalue domestic labour by constructing it as a lesser form of work; Sharma and Zulfiqar demonstrate how education systems embed and transmit gender norms despite formal commitments to equality; Pita illustrates how social protection policies can reinforce the familialisation of care; and Vollmer reveals how informal systems of social protection rely on and reproduce gendered expectations within family and community relations. Across these diverse contexts a common thread emerges: where culturally embedded norms around care and gender roles are not explicitly addressed, social policy risks reinforcing the very inequalities it seeks to mitigate. This underscores the importance of internationally-informed feminist approaches that critically examine policy developments, interrogate normative foundations of policy design and contribute novel and possibly provocative suggestions towards the development of more gender-equal social policies worldwide.

Taken together, these contributions highlight the central role of gendered assumptions about care and social reproduction across both formal and informal welfare arrangements. They show that social policy cannot be understood solely through institutional design or policy instruments but must be analysed in relation to the social relations through which it is enacted. In particular, they demonstrate how the boundaries between state, market, and family are fluid and interconnected, and how gender operates as a key organising principle across these domains.

At the same time, the articles illustrate the importance of situating feminist social policy analysis within broader global dynamics. The organisation of domestic work, the structuring of education systems, the design of social protection programmes, and the functioning of informal support networks are all shaped by transnational processes, including migration, global labour markets, and the legacies of colonialism. Engaging with these dynamics requires moving beyond a centre–periphery model of knowledge production and recognising the theoretical contributions emerging from diverse contexts.

By placing these contributions in conversation, this *Themed Issue* seeks to advance a more globally grounded feminist analysis of social policy. It highlights both commonalities and differences in how gender inequalities are produced and contested and underscores the need for approaches that are attentive to local specificities while engaging with global structures of power. In doing so, it contributes to ongoing efforts to rethink the relationship between feminism and social policy in a way that reflects the complexity and diversity of contemporary social realities.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors did not receive any financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Bacchi, Carol (2009). *Analysing Policy: What's the Problem Represented to Be?* Frenchs Forest, NSW: Pearson.
- Béland, Daniel, Mahon, Rianne (2016). *An Introduction to Social Policy*. Cheltenham, UK and Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar.
- Bettio, Francesca, Plantenga, Janneke (2004). Comparing Care Regimes in Europe. *Feminist Economics*, 10(1), 85–113. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1354570042000198245>.
- Bonfert, Anna, Wadhwa, Divyanshi (2024). *Tracing Global Trends in Education: A Tale of Old and New Gender Gaps*. Data Stories, World Bank Group. Accessed on 30.06.2026 at: <https://gender-data.worldbank.org/en/data-stories/a-tale-of-old-and-new-gender-gaps#>.
- Chancel, Lucas, Gomez-Carrera, Ricardo, Moshrif, Rowaida, Piketty, Thomas (Eds.) (2026). *World Inequality Report*. World Inequality Lab. Polity Press. <https://wir2026.wid.world>.
- Daly, Mary (2011). What Adult Worker Model? A Critical Look at Recent Social Policy Reform in Europe from a Gender and Family Perspective. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 18 (1): 1-23. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sp/jxr002>.
- Daly, Mary, Lewis, Jane (2000). The concept of social care and the analysis of contemporary welfare states. *The British Journal of Sociology*, 51(2): 281-298. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-4446.2000.00281.x>.
- Duffy, Mignon (2005). Reproducing labour inequalities: challenges for feminists conceptualizing care at the intersections of gender, race, and class. *Gender and Society*, 19(1): 66-82. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891243204269499>.
- Fraser, Nancy (1994). After the family wage: Gender equity and the welfare state. *Political Theory*, 22(4): 591-618. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0090591794022004003>.
- Hernes, Helga Maria (1987). *Welfare State and Women Power, Essays in State Feminism*. Oslo: Oxford University Press.
- Molyneux, Maxine (2007). *Change and continuity in social protection in Latin America: mothers at the service of the state*. GD Programme Paper No. 1, UNRISD, Geneva.
- Naumann, Ingela K., Sakali, Joanna, Ribe, Eloi, Ralston, Kevin, Marshall, Alan, Packwood, Helen, Gorton, Victoria, Glover, Hanna (2022). *Child and Parental Wellbeing during the Covid-Pandemic*. Working Paper 1, Childcare and Wellbeing in Times of Covid-19 series. The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh. <https://doi.org/10.7488/era/1914>.
- Pateman, Carol (1988). The Patriarchal Welfare State. In: Carol Pateman. *The Disorder of Women*, Cambridge: Polity Press. 179-209.

- Razavi, Shahra, Staab, Silke (2018). Rethinking social policy: a gender perspective from the developing world. In: Sheila Shaver (Ed.). *Handbook on Gender and Social Policy*. Cheltenham, UK; Northampton, MA, USA: Edward Elgar, 74-89.
- Roberts, Celia, Connell, Raewyn (2016). Feminist theory and the global South. *Feminist Theory*, 17(2): 135-140. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700116645874>.
- Sainsbury, Diane (1996). *Gender, equality, and welfare states*. Cambridge, University Press.
- Sevenhuijsen, Selma (2003). The Place of Care: The Relevance of the Feminist Ethic of Care for Social Policy. *Feminist Theory*. 4 (2): 179–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001030042006>.
- Tronto, Joan C. (1993). *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. New York: Routledge.