

Re-politicising 'Home' as workplace: Gendered-Colonial logics in 'Work from home' and Domestic Labour

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Abstract

Drawing on feminist, anti-caste, and decolonial lenses and using Bacchi's What's the Problem Represented to Be? framework, we analyze how global policy discourses construct 'work from home' (WFH) and 'domestic work', and how those constructions rest on and reproduce colonial, gendered, and caste racial hierarchies that depoliticize the home as a workplace. We analyse eleven policy documents (2011-2024) published by multilateral institutions and by the domestic workers unions. The comparison shows that multilateral reports construct WFH as a matter of flexibility and productivity, domestic work, by contrast, is framed as a deficit of formality, skills, or regulation. Domestic-worker unions produce alternative problematizations by repoliticising the home as a workplace, demanding legal recognition and social protection, and propose an intersectional re-organisation of the global care economy. The article reveals an epistemic struggle over what counts as work and concludes that dismantling colonial gender logics is essential to redefining labour and achieving justice.

Keywords: Domestic work, Work from home, coloniality, intersectionality, policy-making, alternatives

Introduction

Meanwhile, the households in which they work have struggled with additional care responsibilities, as parents juggle teleworking and ensuring that their children are educated while at home. Never before has the interdependence of domestic workers and the households they care for been so clear. Neither has the vulnerability of the millions

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of domestic workers earning a living behind the closed doors of private households been so visible. (ILO 2021b: XII)

COVID-19 brought renewed attention to ‘work from home’ and ‘domestic work,’ and, as the excerpt suggests, turned ‘homes’ into a workspace for these respective sets of workers, visibilizing their interdependencies. Despite these observations, these ‘two worlds of work’ continue to be understood to operate independently. The pandemic functioned as what we call a discursive event, a moment of crisis that intensified policy production and forced implicit assumptions about work, home, and value into the open. It rendered the logics power within WFH and domestic work, momentarily visible and provoked an unprecedented volume of policy responses.

The pandemic reanimated and radically reconfigured the idea of working from home (WFH), shifting it from a marginal work arrangement to a global imperative. This transformation was neither neutral nor uniform. While the corporate discourse often frames WFH as a flexible, empowering innovation, our analysis reveals that it reinscribes longstanding gendered, racialised, and caste-based hierarchies of labour under the guise of (digital) modernity (Banday in press). Consider two proclamations from the global corporation Cognizant: in 2020, WFH was framed as a ‘temporary blip’ (Cognizant 2020: 6); by 2023, it was heralded as the new norm ‘home is where the work is’ (Cognizant 2021: 12). More recently, following corporate backlash, Cognizant has begun disallowing WFH (Bardia 2024). This example illustrates the substantive policy and organisational interventions around WFH that have ensued during and since the pandemic. Domestic work, by contrast, witnessed a different positioning. It was among the ‘worst hit’ sectors (ILO 2021b). Domestic workers’ precarity intensified, yet there were minimal policy redressals for domestic workers. Instead, the policy agendas appear to have further shifted domestic work towards privatized arrangements, leaving the existing domestic workers even more precarious (IDWF 2024). These divergent trajectories reflect not only changing corporate/state strategies but also historically rooted politics in how labour is imagined, managed, and governed.

This paper critically interrogates how WFH and domestic work are problematised in global labour policy discourse. Adopting a feminist, decolonial, and anti-caste lens (Dalwai 2019; England/Lawson 2005; Rege 1998; Mirchandani 1998; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2014, 2018; Segato 2022), we argue that current representations of WFH simultaneously obscure and extract domestic labour, disproportionately burdening women, caste-oppressed, and racialised workers in the Global South. Drawing on Carol Bacchi’s “What’s the Problem Represented to Be?” (WPR) framework (Bacchi 2009; Bacchi/Goodwin 2016), we examine how policies actively construct ‘problems’ through discourse. Our object of analysis is therefore to ask how policies are discursively constructed as problems within authoritative policy texts. We treat these texts as sites where meaning is produced and contested. The WPR approach enables us to analyse how work is framed, what assumptions underpin those framings, and what structural inequalities are left unexamined. We apply the WPR framework to analyse a corpus of policy documents from international institutions such as the International Labour Organization (ILO), UN Women, and the World Economic Forum, alongside advocacy materials from grassroots domestic worker organisations, including the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) and National Domestic Workers Alliance (NDWA).

Our findings show that WFH is consistently framed as a matter of invisibility, flexibility, and productivity, assuming a disembodied, digital worker and erasing the reproductive labour that sustains such work. Simultaneously, domestic labour is represented as a problem of deficit, informality, or vulnerability, justifying technocratic fixes rather than structural transformation. These policies mobilize market rationality, surface intersectionality, and developmental logics to focus on regulatory gaps rather than the gendered-racial structures of marginalization. As we show, these representations rely on enduring binaries, including public/private, productive/reproductive, and formal/informal, that obscure how caste, gender, and race structure labour relations at both global and domestic scales. By drawing on grassroots feminist movements, we foreground alternative problematisations of labour that challenge the framing of domestic work as vulnerability and reassert it as political and world-making. These movements refuse the logic of flexibility as empowerment and instead demand legal recognition, redistribution of care, and epistemic justice.

Before proceeding, we clarify how we use the two central terms of this analysis. By 'work from home' (WFH), we refer to paid work performed in one's own home for an employer or client. This includes pandemic-induced remote work among salaried professionals, longer-standing forms of industrial homework, and home-based digital platform work. The common thread is that the worker's own home becomes the site of paid labour. By 'domestic work,' we refer to paid care and household labour performed in an employer's home, as defined in ILO Convention 189 (2011). This includes cleaning, cooking, care work, and other household tasks. Domestic work is paid employment, yet it has historically been positioned outside formal definitions of 'work' due to its location in the private sphere and its feminised, racialised, and caste-coded character. Unpaid domestic labour performed in one's own home, what is often called 'housework', is not the primary object of our analysis. However, it is analytically relevant as the hidden foundation that enables WFH, particularly for women in the Global South who absorb the reproductive labour that makes remote work possible for others. Our interest lies in how policy discourse constructs paid WFH and unpaid domestic work, and how these constructions rest on the unpaid reproductive labour that remains unacknowledged.

The paper proceeds as follows. Section two develops our theoretical framework, weaving together feminist political economy, decolonial theory, and anti-caste critique to conceptualize the home as a political space and labour as a terrain of struggle. Section three explains our WPR methodology, document selection criteria, and analytic procedure. Section four presents our findings in two parts: first analysing multilateral problematisations of WFH and domestic work, then examining alternative problematisations from domestic worker movements. Section five concludes with implications for policy and future research and acknowledges the study's limitations.

Theoretical Framework

To understand how 'home' and 'work' are configured in contemporary policy discourse, we must first understand the historical production of these categories. Feminist and decolonial scholars have shown that the separation of productive and reproductive labour, and of public and domestic spheres, is a colonial invention. It continues to shape who is recognized as a

worker, which forms of labour count as 'work,' and how the 'home' is understood as a site of economic activity.

The position of 'home' and 'work' relations continues to be defined by the interlocking systems of coloniality, patriarchy, and racial capitalism. These relations of gendered racial power constitute our systems of knowledge, epistemology, labour, sexuality, and subjectivities (Maldonado-Torres 2007). Decolonial feminist scholars argue that this binary hierarchical ordering of productive and reproductive labour is constitutive of the gendered coloniality/modernity projects (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010), which was produced through the politicization of the (masculine) public sphere and depoliticization of the (feminine) domestic sphere. As decolonial feminist scholar Rita Segato (2022: 9) argues:⁴

With the advance of this “white” front and the capture of gender relations, as well as other hierarchies, within the binary structure of creole modernity, the masculine position was inflated and absolutized, and masculine space—public space—was transformed into a sphere that uprooted (in Karl Polanyi’s economic sense), sequestered, and monopolized politics. This left the domestic sphere in a residual position: nuclearized, depoliticized, privatized, and described as “intimate.”

Industrial capitalism and the colonial binary constructed 'productive work' as the domain of men, accomplished in separate public spaces such as offices and factories at specific times (linear office time). Domestic work, by contrast, was relegated to the privacy of 'homes,' performed by women working around the clock (circular domestic time). This division produced gendered subjects of breadwinners and homemakers (Ferree 1990), through the separation of productive and reproductive labour (Dibavar 2022). The domestic sphere became a space for free reproductive labour and the rejuvenation of gendered workers (Mirchandani 1998). Activities associated with care, maintenance, and emotional labour were rendered foundational to capitalist accumulation while being systematically unrecognized as work (Hochschild 1983; DeVault 1991; Fisher/Tronto 1990).

Colonial gendered racialization entailed racial divisions in gendered productive and reproductive labour, intensifying local hierarchies as well as transnational racialization (Lugones 2007; Segato 2022). Such racial-gendered logics of power become interlocked with other regimes of power to marginalize specific communities. For instance, in the context of South Asia, caste and racial hierarchies interlocked in reinforcing and naturalising the assignment of “polluting” tasks, including sanitation, care, and domestic work, to caste-oppressed communities, while DBA women faced extreme exploitation (Paik 2022; Rege 1998; Guru 1995). The assignment of care and service labour to DBA women is enforced to allow an entitled access to cheap labour for oppressor caste communities (Dalwai 2019) and enable them to be transnationally mobile (Radhakrishnan 2020).

⁴ Coloniality refers to the racial gendered systems of power that were established during colonialism but continue to structure our contemporary world, including labour relations, knowledge production, and spatial organization, long after formal colonial rule has ended (Quijano 2000; Segato 2022).

'Work from home' and 'domestic work'

The emergence of WFH gained prominence with the emergence of teleworking, which troubled the relations between 'work' and 'space' by making it possible to convert non-workplaces into places of 'work'. Technological developments enabled moving 'work' out of the 'workplace', through phones, emails, and web-based applications, thus, creating distributed workplaces beyond traditional offices (Huws 1991; Olson 1983; Lindström/Moberg/Rapp 1997). However, such arrangements were never neutral. They reorganized work within normative spatial imaginaries rooted in capitalist patriarchal divisions of labour, where the home was maintained as a site of restoration (Christensen 1988; Mirchandani 1998). Against celebratory narratives of WFH as liberatory or inclusive, England and Lawson (2005) and Agnihotri (2025) argue that WFH is part of a neoliberal script of flexibility, where structural burdens are reframed as personal choices and autonomy (Dixit 2024b). Flexibility here, redistributes risk and responsibility. Workers, especially in the Global South, are hailed as agile and adaptable, even as they navigate intensifying pressures of unpaid care, inadequate infrastructure, and precarious employment (Zulfiqar/Shafique 2022).

Through a decolonial feminist lens, WFH has to be understood to be co-constitutive of the extension of the global capitalist order as the means to access 'cheaper gendered-racial workforce' while simultaneously contending with modernity/coloniality's 'collapse, privatization and nuclearization of domestic space' (Segato 2022: 98). WFH is, therefore, deeply embedded in historical and ongoing structures of racial capitalism. Rather than marking a departure from older labour regimes, it reanimates and reorganises them under new signs of flexibility and productivity enabled by digital transformations.

In contrast, domestic/household work is positioned, by principle, beyond the notions of 'work' within the colonial, racial-gendered regimes (Acciari 2019). It continues to reside in the 'in-between spaces' of (paid)work and leisure (Mirchandani 1998). Domestic work is theorized as a 'hybrid category', situated at the intersection of modernity/coloniality, as the labour that 'capital does not invest in or act directly upon, but that which it exploits' (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010: 42). Contesting these binary gendered work divisions, feminist and decolonial scholars emphasize the interdependence of productive and reproductive labour and theorize 'home' as a place of 'work' (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010; Glucksmann 2005; Mirchandani 1998). The work of social reproduction, including care work and 'maintaining a home' (Chattopadhyay 2021), is essential for the work conventionally associated with production (Federici 2020). This scholarship thus visibilizes the gendered ideological assumptions in 'work' and 'non-work', which produced the categories of 'domestic work', household work', and their historical classification as 'non-work' (Federici 2020; Mirchandani 1999).⁵

Decolonial feminist scholars argue that home or domestic sphere is not a neutral or private space, but a colonial, gendered, and racialised space of governance (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010; Segato 2022). It is the gendered colonial binary world-making that seeks to produce the home/domestic sphere as an intimate apolitical space in transnational racial capitalism. By

⁵ As Mirchandani (1998) mentions, this critique involved analysing and theorizing the complex relations of time, effort, skill, resources and budgeting and management involved in 'doing a meal' (DeVault, 1991), care work (Fisher/Tronto, 1990), and emotional labour at home or at work (Hochschild, 1983).

weaving together insights from feminist political economy, decolonial theory, and anti-caste critique, this framework enables a reconceptualisation of labour as a terrain of struggle, shaped by spatial, epistemic, and material inequalities.

Methodology

This paper adopts Carol Bacchi and Susan Goodwin's What's the Problem Represented to Be? (WPR) approach as a poststructural method of policy analysis. WPR treats policy as a discursive technology that constitutes 'problems', subjects, and 'solutions'. Central to the WPR framework is the understanding that policies actively construct 'problems' through specific discourses (Bacchi 2009; Bacchi/Goodwin 2016). In this sense, policy is treated as a prescriptive and productive apparatus that defines what is thinkable, governable, and actionable. WPR encourages us to ask what is rendered 'speakingable'. While the full WPR framework consists of seven analytical questions, this study focuses specifically on the following three questions:

Q1 What is the 'problem' represented to be in a specific policy or policies?

Q2 What deep-seated presuppositions or assumptions underlie this representation of the 'problem'?

Q4 What is left unproblematic in this representation? Where are the silences? Can the 'problem' be thought about differently?

This selection was guided by the study's objective to examine how 'work' is discursively constructed and delimited in global labour policy, rather than to evaluate policy effects or implementation. Questions 3 (How has this representation come about?), 5 (What effects are produced by this representation?), and 6 (How and where is this representation produced, defended, and contested?) are oriented toward genealogical analysis of policy development or impact assessment, which lies beyond the scope of this textual-interventionist inquiry. Focusing on Q1, Q2, and Q4 enables a thick description of discursive content and the presuppositions that stabilise it, while Q4 is methodologically essential for surfacing alternative problematizations, which is a central aim of this paper's comparison between multilateral and domestic-worker movement texts. These questions allow us to trace how binaries such as productive/reproductive and formal/informal are mobilised, and which forms of labour and subjectivities are rendered absent or marginal.

The first two questions guide the identification of how work⁶ is framed in selected policy documents, including those produced by multilateral institutions such as the ILO, UN Women,

⁶ It is important to note the differences in how work and home relations differ in the definitions of work from home (or home work) and domestic work. Home work is defined in the ILO's Home Work Convention (No. 177) as "work carried out by a person ... (i) in his or her home or in other premises of his or her choice, other than the workplace of the employer; (ii) for remuneration; (iii) which results in a product or service as specified by the employer, irrespective of who provides the equipment, materials or other inputs used" (Convention No. 177, Art. 1). ILO further specifies that these workers should not be independent workers (characterised by their degree of autonomy at work and financial independence) and that home/non-employer premises should not be just an occasional workplace. Home work includes industrial home work, telework and home-based digital platform work. Domestic work is defined in ILO Convention No 189 as 'work performed in or for a household or households, within an employment relationship and on an occupational basis'. Domestic work is considered to include

the World Bank, and WHO. Special attention is paid to the binaries and normative logics (e.g., productive/reproductive, formal/informal) that underpin these representations. Question 4 allows the analysis to surface what is rendered invisible, taken for granted, or actively excluded in these representations. This opens up space to explore alternative problematisations, specifically, those articulated by domestic worker unions and feminist grassroots organisations.

This study adopts a critical, feminist, and decolonial analytic stance. In line with WPR, it does not claim neutrality or inductive openness in the positivist sense. Instead, it starts from the premise that policy discourses are structured by power and that certain inequalities are systematically rendered invisible (Dixit 2024a). The purpose of the analysis is therefore not to test whether such dynamics exist, but to examine how they are produced, stabilised, and normalised in policy texts, and where tensions and contradictions are contained rather than resolved.

Following the WPR approach, this study treats policy documents as prescriptive texts that construct social problems through the solutions they advance. Consequently, the empirical corpus was not designed to capture the full range of debates or institutional positions surrounding WFH and domestic work, but to analyse how these issues are rendered governable in authoritative policy outputs. Documents were selected using four criteria. First, they had to be produced by multilateral institutions (ILO, UN Women, World Bank, World Economic Forum) or by organised domestic worker movements (IDWF, IDWN), enabling a comparison between dominant institutional problematisations and counter-problematisations articulated by workers' organisations. Second, documents had to be solution-oriented, meaning they contained explicit recommendations, guidance, or policy frameworks rather than purely descriptive accounts, a criterion that follows directly from WPR's emphasis on analysing 'problems' through proposed interventions. Third, documents had to address WFH and/or domestic work substantively, rather than passing. Fourth, the time frame (2011–2024, with a concentration around COVID-19) was chosen to capture both the pandemic-induced expansion of WFH and its longer-term institutionalisation. Few reports predate COVID-19, as they were necessary for historical understanding. Based on the objective to compare multilateral policies on WFH and domestic work, we selected reports pertaining to both. For policies of alternative actors, we used the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF). WFH workers are still not collectively organized; therefore, corresponding reports are missing, an absence that reflects the individualized framing this paper critiques. The final corpus of eleven documents is listed in Table 1.

Rather than analysing documents as undifferentiated wholes, we identified and extracted specific textual segments where solutions were proposed (e.g. recommendations, "should" statements, policy toolkits). The unit of analysis was therefore the prescriptive segment rather than the document as a whole. This approach aligns with WPR's instruction to work backwards from proposed interventions to implied problem representations (Bacchi 2009). The extraction was comprehensive rather than selective: every paragraph that contained an explicit recommendation, a normative claim about what "should" be done, or a framing of a policy solution (e.g.,

various types of tasks including cleaning, cooking, care work, gardening, driving, among others. As per ILO the 'defining characteristic of domestic work was determined to be the workplace – that is, the household' due to the heterogeneity of their tasks. Home as a workplace is defined differently in these definitions with home being one's own home in WFH and employers' home in domestic work. This means that domestic work done by people (mostly women) in their own homes is not considered work in these definitions.

"skills training for domestic workers," "social dialogue to manage work-life balance," "investment in digital infrastructure") was copied into a structured data table.

Table 1: List of policy documents

S. No	Report	Year	Agency
Dominant multilateral Policy Reports			
1	Working from Home: Estimating the worldwide potential	2020	International Labour Organization (ILO)
2	Who on Earth can work from home	2021	World Bank Group Working paper by Sanchez et al.
3	Whose time to Care	2021	UN Women
4	Working from home: From invisibility to decent work	2021a	International Labour Organization (ILO)
5	Making decent work a reality for domestic workers: Progress and prospects ten years after the adoption of the Domestic Workers Convention, 2011 (No. 189)	2021b	International Labour Organization (ILO)
6	Pathways to Inclusion: Learning from the COVID-19 Policy Response	2022	World Economic Forum (WEF)
7	Covid-19 Global Gender Response Tracker	2022	UN Women and UNDP
Contesting policy reports			
8	Myths and realities about domestic workers	2011	International Domestic Workers Network (IDWN)
9	A paradigm shift for the care economy and domestic workers	2021	International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)
10	Building Power, Realizing Rights	2023	International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)
11	The Centrality of Care and Support	2024	International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF)

The analysis proceeded abductively, iterating between the theoretical framework and the textual data rather than applying a pre-determined coding scheme or claiming purely inductive emergence. The analytical procedure comprised five steps.

Step 1: Segment extraction. As described above, we extracted all prescriptive segments pertaining to WFH or domestic work and tabulated them with document metadata.

Step 2: Problem representation (WPR Q1). For each segment, we asked: "If this is the solution, what is the 'problem' represented to be?" For instance, the solution "professionalization and skills training for domestic workers" (ILO 2021b: 214) implies a problem of "domestic workers' skill deficit." The solution "managing work-life tension through social dialogue" (ILO 2020: 6) implies a problem of "undesirable friction between work and care."

Step 3: Identification of presuppositions and binary logics (WPR Q2). We conducted a theoretically informed close reading of the extracted segments to analyse the deep seated assumptions that underpin the problem representations. Guided by feminist political economy, decolonial theory, and anti-caste critique, we interrogated how binaries (productive/reproductive, formal/informal, public/private, Global North/Global South) were mobilised to stabilise particular framings. For example, the repeated framing of Sub-Saharan Africa as lacking "readiness" for remote work (ILO 2020: 4) was read as an assumption that development is a linear, teleological process which is a presupposition rooted in colonial modern developmental logics. This step involved tracing the implicit normative commitments that make certain solutions appear self-evident while rendering alternatives unintelligible.

Step 4: Silences and exclusions (WPR Q4). We examined what is not problematised in the policy solutions. For example, while multilateral reports recommend "social dialogue" to manage work life tension, they do not problematise the unequal distribution of care responsibilities between men and women, nor do they address the role of employers in creating precarious conditions. IDWF documents, by contrast, explicitly problematise the exclusionary design of contribution based social protection systems. This comparative reading across corpuses, reading the dominant texts contrapuntally with the subaltern texts, made silences visible.

Step 5: Thematic consolidation. Through iterative comparison of the problem representations, presuppositions, and silences identified across the multilateral corpus, three dominant thematic patterns crystallised: (i) the framing of WFH through flexibility and productivity and domestic work through informality and deficit; (ii) the deployment of what we term 'surface intersectionality', which is a discursive strategy that enumerates demographic categories (gender, class, region) while abstracting them from the historical, colonial, caste, and racial power relations that produce their meaning; and (iii) the naturalisation of global inequality through developmental logics that present the Global South as "not yet ready" for modern work arrangements. Likewise, in the alternative corpus, the excerpts coalesced into three themes: (i) Politicizing 'home' as workplaces; (ii) Problematizing structural and institutional power; (iii) Embedding intersectionality.

This analysis does not assume that multilateral institutions speak with a single, coherent voice, nor that global policy-making is uncontested. On the contrary, feminist and decolonial scholarship has long emphasised that institutions such as the UN are sites of struggle, negotiation, and uneven power (Escobar 1995; Dixit/Banday 2022; Bacchi 2009). However, WPR directs analytical attention to what stabilises in authoritative, prescriptive texts. Our analysis therefore examines how, despite contestation, certain problem representations become dominant in policy outputs that guide governance, funding, and evaluation. Highlighting these dominant representations makes complexities visible which voices and perspectives fail to travel into the policy solutions that ultimately matter. It is also important to clarify our treatment of the "Global South" in this analysis. We do not claim to represent the experiences or voices of Global

South workers directly. Rather, we examine how Global South labour is discursively constructed in policy texts produced primarily by institutions headquartered in the Global North. When we note, for example, that policy documents frame workers in Sub-Saharan Africa or South Asia as less capable of remote work, we are analysing how these regions are produced as lacking or underdeveloped within colonial-modern developmental logics. The alternative problematizations offered by IDWF, which centre the knowledge of workers from the Global South, provide a crucial counterpoint as an epistemic intervention that challenges the very terms of global policy discourse.

Findings

Multilateral institutional problematization

Invisibility, deficit, and market rationality

Policy discourse frames the pandemic-era shift to work-from-home (WFH) as a technical response to crisis as an adaptation rather than a structural transformation. Within this framing, WFH appears as an extension of pre-existing 'home work,' long rendered invisible by its feminised location in the private sphere (ILO 2021a: 30). Domestic work is also positioned as invisible labour, but here the primary problematisation centres on what the ILO terms a 'decent work deficit', that is, gaps in legal coverage, working time, wages, and social security (ILO 2021b: XX, 213). What remains unproblematised in both cases is why this invisibility and deficit persist. The framing treats them as incidental outcomes rather than structural features of modern/colonial capitalism, which systematically extracts reproductive labour without recognition or compensation (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010; Federici 2020). The ILO's own history of excluding domestic workers from labour protections, despite recognising their importance as early as 1936, remains unexamined (D'Souza 2010).

Both WFH and domestic work are problematised through market-centric logics, though in different registers. WFH is portrayed as a solution for maintaining economic continuity and as a model of individualised empowerment, especially for marginalised groups:

The opportunity to work from home is welcomed by women and men seeking flexibility, but also by workers with disabilities who may otherwise have fewer opportunities for paid work. (ILO 2021a: 3)

Here, the 'problem' is represented as a lack of access to formal labour markets and flexibility. This representation rests on several presuppositions: that flexibility is universally beneficial, that marginalised subjects benefit from participation in market logics, and that working from home can be seamlessly integrated with domestic responsibilities. These assumptions obscure the fact that WFH often relies on rather than relieves, particularly for women in Global South households who cannot outsource this labour. The framing also presents WFH as an opportunity for disabled workers without interrogating the ableist structures of work itself.

Flexibility is problematised in contradictory ways. It is celebrated as enabling autonomy and work-life balance (ILO 2021a: 158), while also recognised as blurring work/non-work boundaries (ILO 2021a: 5). This discursive inconsistency reveals the fragility of the dominant framing.

Yet rather than interrogating flexibility as a site of structural, particularly gendered and caste-based burden, policy texts render it an effect to be 'managed' through vague appeals to 'social dialogue.' The ultimate evaluative criterion remains market efficiency. Even when gendered burdens are acknowledged, they appear as productivity risks rather than injustices demanding structural redress:

The positive impacts on work-life balance have to be weighed up against considerations such as efficiency and productivity... (WEF 2022: 15)

This produces workers as self-responsibilised subjects whose value is contingent on managing competing demands without burdening employers or disrupting productivity (Banday 2025). Such representations produce a 'cruel illusion' (Christensen 1988) that spatial and individual reconfiguration can resolve deeply entrenched labour inequalities. The representation of WFH as 'highly flexible' normalises the outsourcing of risk onto workers:

Industrial home work and home-based, digital platform work represent highly flexible forms of production that allow enterprises to respond swiftly to shifts in product demand and to reduce costs. ... The availability of this labour force – often women who combine home work with domestic and care responsibilities – is highly dependent on gender roles in both the household and society. (ILO 2021a: 2)

This excerpt describes a labour arrangement in which enterprises 'reduce costs' by relying on a workforce whose 'availability' is 'highly dependent on gender roles.' This constitutes the outsourcing of risk and the extraction of value from unpaid reproductive labour. Yet rather than naming this as exploitation, the policy text frames this precarity as agility or as a desirable and ostensibly efficient feature of post-industrial capitalism. The text's own descriptive content (cost reduction through gendered availability) is rendered compatible with a framing of 'flexibility' as neutral or beneficial. The availability of home-based labour, particularly from women in the Global South, is portrayed as a logistical asset in a globally flexible economy. This framing reinscribes colonial gender logics (Lugones 2007), which positioned Global South women as functional appendages of capital, always available to absorb the demands of flexible production. The celebration of flexibility relies on the unstated but structurally necessary assumption that racialised and caste-oppressed women are always already available to bear the burden of unpaid or low-waged care and domestic labour. The ILO passage names 'gender roles' as the mechanism of availability but stops short of interrogating how those gender roles are themselves constituted through colonial and caste hierarchies. The silence on race, caste, and coloniality is what enables 'flexibility' to appear as a neutral feature of labour markets rather than as a continuation of the colonial-gendered extraction that feminist decolonial scholarship has documented (Lugones 2007; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010).

In the multilateral framing, the 'problem' of domestic work is individualised, that is, workers are pushed into the sector by 'poverty' and 'lack of employment opportunities' (ILO 2021b: 18), and the solution is 'professionalization' and 'skills training' (ILO 2021b: 214). This structure of reasoning, locating the deficit in the worker and the remedy in market-readiness, is what we term neoliberal market logics. Here, the work itself is framed as undesirable, posited as an outcome of poverty and lack of opportunity rather than a legitimate occupational choice:

Research has already substantiated some of the factors that push women and men to seek employment as domestic workers. Some of the most pronounced factors are poverty, a need to generate more income for their families, and a lack of employment opportunities. (ILO 2021b: 18)

Such problematization implicitly assumes domestic work to be 'less valuable' work that no one would freely choose. The enumerated drivers, 'poverty,' 'need to generate more income,' 'lack of employment opportunities', present domestic work exclusively through the lens of deficit and compulsion. This framing implicitly accepts the devaluation of the work itself as self-evident; it neglects to ask why domestic work is poorly paid, low-status, and unprotected in the first place. That question would require examining the masculine, casteist, and racial logics that historically assigned care and household labour to women, to caste-oppressed communities, and to racialised populations, marking it as 'inferior' and 'undeserving of recognition' (Rege 1998; Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010). The ILO text's silence on this production of undesirability through its treatment of domestic work's low status as a given rather than as a socio-political achievement of colonial-gendered hierarchies, produces the discursive effect of its 'apparent' naturalness or inevitability. Even when domestic workers are included in the 'care economy,' they are positioned at the margins:

Domestic workers are those workers in the care economy who work in or for a household or households on an occupational basis (ILO 2018a). The inclusion of domestic workers in the care economy recognizes the fact that domestic workers provide services and goods that are socially necessary for the maintenance of households and the well-being of families, most often in the form of either direct or indirect care activities. (ILO 2021b: 34)

Framing domestic labour as 'maintenance of households and well-being of families' rather than as economically productive work reproduces the depoliticisation of the domestic sphere (Segato 2022). The solution proposed is 'professionalization' and 'skill training':

They [professionalization and skill training] can also increase the confidence of domestic workers by shifting their perception of themselves to that of skilled workers delivering a service of value to households. This approach can empower domestic workers and strengthen their ability to negotiate with their employers, whether to request that they be registered with the social security system, bargain for higher wages or ask for time off. (ILO 2021b: 214)

Here, the 'problem' is implicitly located in domestic workers' lack of professionalism and skills. ILO recommends that workers 'shift their perception of themselves', framing the barrier to decent work as workers' self-perception rather than employers' behaviour or state regulatory failure. By constructing the remedy as worker-focused training and confidence-building, the text renders invisible the role of employers, whose non-registration, underpayment, and abusive practices are never framed as a 'skills deficit' requiring intervention. This obscures the power relations that structure their marginalisation and leaves unexamined the role of employers whose lack of professionalism in creating exploitative conditions is never problematised. It is

important to acknowledge that the adoption of ILO Convention 189 (2011) represents a significant achievement, won through decades of organising by domestic worker movements (IDWN 2011). C189 formally recognises domestic work as work and affirms domestic workers' rights to labour protection, social security, and collective bargaining. Yet even after C189, the dominant discursive framing within ILO reports continues to position domestic work through logics of deficit, informality, and vulnerability. This pattern is evident across the multilateral corpus, from the ILO's problematisation of domestic work as a 'decent work deficit' to the framing of workers as pushed by 'poverty' and 'lack of employment opportunities' to the solution of 'professionalization'. Across these instances, the consistent implication is that the problem resides in the sector or the worker, rather than in the institutional arrangements that produce precarious conditions. Legal recognition, while essential, has not unsettled the deeper colonial-gendered hierarchies that devalue reproductive labour. This tension between formal recognition and persistent discursive devaluation illustrates the limits of inclusion without an epistemic shift. C189 is a site of ongoing struggle that shows how a formal victory with transformative potential is contained by the very discursive structures we identify.

Across the multilateral policy discourses examined (ILO 2020; ILO 2021a; ILO 2021b; WEF 2022; UN Women 2021), WFH and domestic work appear as sites of neutral or adaptive innovation. What remains invisible is the private home itself as a political space, structured through gendered colonial binaries: "nuclearized, depoliticized, privatized, and described as 'intimate'" (Segato 2022: 9). The gendered division of labour is naturalised, assumed as cultural given rather than recognised as the outcome of colonial-modern regimes of spatial and racial ordering.

Surface intersectionality and unproblematised inequalities

Policy representations of work-from-home (WFH) often gesture toward gender and class inequalities, but they do so in ways that obscure the structural logics underpinning those inequalities. Policy texts frame both forms of work as 'highly gendered,' drawing attention to statistical disparities:

Most home-based workers are women... The propensity of women to work from home (11.5 per cent) is much higher than that of men (5.6 per cent). Because it takes place in the home, it is no surprise that homework is a highly gendered form of production. (ILO 2021a: 3)

Domestic work remains a female-dominated sector, employing 57.7 million women, who account for 76.2 per cent of domestic workers. Women domestic workers outnumber men domestic workers in nearly all countries and in all regions except the Arab States, with the highest share being in the Americas at 89 per cent. (ILO 2021b: 11)

Such representations acknowledge imbalance but neglect the systems that produce and maintain it. The 'problem' of gendered composition is left unproblematised. There is no interrogation of why care labour remains disproportionately feminized, nor of how the burden of reproductive labour is naturalised within policy discourse. Regional variations, such as the higher prevalence of men in domestic work in Arab and North African countries, are noted but left unexplained.

When policy texts do address gendered burdens, the solutions offered are ‘technocratic’ rather than structural. By ‘technocratic’ we mean solutions that target measurable outputs (childcare infrastructure, flexible work guidelines) without challenging the gendered division of labour, the distribution of care responsibilities between men and women, or the market logics that position care as a private burden to be accommodated rather than a public good to be collectively valued. While investment in childcare services is undoubtedly necessary, the WEF’s framing treats it as a ‘substitute’ for workplace flexibility (WEF 2022: 21), that is, a compensatory fix that enables women to remain in the labour market without interrogating why care remains their responsibility in the first place. A structural approach would, by contrast, problematise the unequal distribution of care, propose incentives for men’s uptake, and challenge the assumption that care is an obstacle to, rather than a foundation of, productive work. For instance:

The normalization of teleworking risks entrenching disadvantages for women... [but] the widespread extension of flexible work arrangements cannot be seen as a substitute for proper childcare services. (WEF 2022: 21)

Here, the solution is investment in childcare which functions as a compensatory measure that leaves untouched the role of men, the redistribution of care, or broader shifts in gender norms. This logic extends to how caregiving is framed in relation to WFH:

The potential overlap between paid work and personal life can have negative effects for workers (particularly women, who still undertake the largest share of care-related tasks), but also for enterprises, if it negatively impacts productivity. Managing these possible tensions, through social dialogue, is critical. (ILO 2020: 6)

In this excerpt, care work is not framed as valuable or essential, but as a potential disruption to productivity. The text states that the overlap between paid work and personal life ‘can have negative effects for workers’ but immediately adds ‘also for enterprises, if it negatively impacts productivity’. The primary concern is thus the risk to enterprise productivity; care appears as a logistical problem to be ‘managed’ through ‘social dialogue.’ Nowhere does the excerpt affirm the intrinsic value of care labour, its contribution to social reproduction, or the legitimacy of caregiving as a claim on time and resources in its own right. The value of care is rendered subordinate to the imperative of uninterrupted productivity which is a classic operation of market rationality in policy discourse. ‘Social dialogue’ is offered as a solution without specifying who participates, who facilitates, or how power asymmetries are addressed.

We term this pattern “surface intersectionality”, which refers to a policy tool that lists gendered or classed disparities without confronting the historical, racial, and colonial regimes that produce and sustain them. Intersectionality becomes descriptive, not analytic. It names categories but does not examine how they interlock. This pattern appears across multiple registers. Policy texts note regional occupational disparities in WFH as matters of fact:

Only 20% of clerical support workers... can work from home in low-income countries versus 42% in high-income countries... 30% of North American workers can work remotely, versus 6% in Sub-Saharan Africa and 8% in South Asia. (ILO 2020: 2–4)

Such representations reduce inequality to infrastructure gaps or occupational distribution, as though these are 'natural' developmental stages. Such representations reduce inequality to infrastructure gaps or occupational distribution. ILO doesn't state these disparities are natural, but that the form in which the data is presented, as descriptive facts, unaccompanied by any account of the colonial histories that produced differential infrastructure, occupational segregation, and labour market segmentation, invites the reader to accept global inequality as a baseline condition rather than a political outcome. The implicit logic is that some regions are simply at an earlier stage of a universal developmental trajectory, an assumption that feminist decolonial scholarship has shown to be central to colonial-modern governance (Escobar 1995; Segato 2022). This is enabled by the policy silence on the transnational racial division of labour, the system through which colonial capitalism has historically funneled low-paid, manual, and service work to the Global South (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2010). That racialised and caste-oppressed women are overrepresented in jobs that cannot be done remotely is presented as an unfortunate distributional mismatch, not as an effect of colonial and caste-based labour ordering. Similarly, policy texts link domestic workers' exploitation to the empowerment of 'other women':

Women represent nearly 80 per cent of all domestic workers, almost all of whom are working in the most vulnerable situations. They have made a vital contribution to reducing gender inequality by enabling millions of their female employers to participate in the paid labour market. (ILO 2021b: XIII)

This problematization assumes a universal category of 'women' who can stand in for one another. It renders invisible the intersectional regimes of power, including caste, class, ethnicity, religion, that position certain women in domestic work while enabling others to employ them. In India, for example, such arrangements reproduce caste inequalities (Wadekar 2019), yet these dynamics are erased when gender is treated as a unified category. The reduction of complex power regimes to class-based disparities is equally evident:

Remote working could deepen the gap separating those at the top from those at the bottom in terms of income distribution... employees with the capacity to work remotely can negotiate a 'back-to-office premium' unavailable to those who cannot work remotely. (WEF 2022: 20)

Here, inequality is construed primarily as labour market segmentation or income tiers rather than a racialised and gendered system of disposability. Likewise, the racial-gendered constitution of transnational domestic work (Gutiérrez Rodríguez 2014) is often reduced to the 'neutral' term of migrant workers:

Migrant workers often find employment in domestic work, particularly in Northern, Southern and Western Europe, a subregion that continues to attract some of the largest flows of migrant workers in the world. (ILO 2021b: 35)

The racial economic structuring, which makes certain regions more 'attractive' than others, is invisibilised in such problematizations. Policy discourse thus quantifies exclusion without naming its foundations, reducing structural violence to a question of digital access, occupational fit, or income tiers. The effect is to contain intersectionality's critical potential, transforming it from a tool for analysing interlocking oppressions into a checklist of demographic categories.

Work as a Developmental, Dehistoricised, and Gendered-Racialised Problem

Across policy documents, the ‘problem’ of work-from-home (WFH) is repeatedly framed in technocratic terms as a question of infrastructure, occupational type, and skill alignment. This is evident in how the potential for WFH is calculated:

According to our calculations, close to 18% of workers work in occupations and live in countries with the infrastructure that would allow them to effectively perform their work from home. (ILO 2020: 2)

In Bacchi’s terms, this constructs the problem as one of infrastructural and logistical compatibility between workers and digital environments. The underlying assumption is that access to WFH is neutral and merit-based, dependent on local economic structures, broadband access, and job type rather than on colonial and racialised histories of labour extraction. Indeed, geopolitical inequalities are rendered as predictable, even inevitable:

The fact that workers in developed economies are more capable of working from home is not a surprise. Many workers in developing nations are employed in occupations such as construction worker or in informal services and cannot work from home. (ILO 2020: 4)

Through such colonial meaning systems, inequality is naturalised and even banalised, something that is expected rather than interrogated. Such problematization sustains the epistemic containment of development discourses (Patel 2020), where inequality is rendered measurable and manageable without confronting the global hierarchies that sustain it (Dixit/Banday 2022). The production of labour markets in the Global South as “underdeveloped” or “not ready” for remote work flattens centuries of structural exclusion. This conversion of historically produced inequalities into technical and economic problems is fundamental to what Murrey and Mollett (2023) call ‘racial colonial extractivism.’ The racialised labour histories of the Global South, from indenture and enslavement to caste-based segregation and economic exclusion, are erased from view.

When informal or feminised home-based work is addressed, it is similarly framed as risk or regulatory gap:

A final important risk of home work is the high level of informality... Industrial home work is also associated with the use of child labour... (ILO 2021: 5)

Despite the important contribution that domestic workers make to society by caring for children, sick people and the elderly and assisting others with the maintenance of their homes and daily housekeeping and home chores, 81.2 per cent remain in the informal economy and many experience poor working conditions. (ILO 2020: 6)

Such problem representations construct informality and regulatory gaps as pathologies, without interrogating how both formal and informal labour systems are constituted through the exclusion, marginalization, and precarity of caste, racialized, colonial-gendered workers (Boeri 2018; de Souza/Barbosa 2024). Finally, the possibility of producing social safety nets for workers is seen to present the risk of dependency:

Temporary extensions of social safety nets... may have created an expectation that such extraordinary measures could become permanent. (WEF 2022: 3)

Here, the 'problem' becomes the durability of social protection itself. Rights and protections are acceptable only as emergency measures in response to crisis. Underlying this is a logic that survival itself should remain contingent and conditional for marginalised populations and that social protection, once extended, risks creating 'expectation.'

This third pattern reveals how policy discourse converts historically produced inequalities into technical problems of infrastructure, skills, and regulation. The developmental framing naturalizes global hierarchies, erases colonial labour histories, and positions social protection as an exceptional measure rather than a right. WFH becomes a marker of development, something some countries are "ready" for and others are not, rather than a site where colonial-gendered labour regimes are reconfigured. The effect is to render structural violence manageable: quantified, measured, and governed without fundamental change.

"Alternative Problematisations" and Political Subjectivities in Domestic Worker Movements

Before turning to alternative problematisations, it is important to acknowledge a structural limitation of this comparison. While domestic workers have built transnational organizations such as the IDWF that produce counter-discourses, WFH workers, particularly those in precarious, informal, or Global South contexts, remain largely unorganized. No equivalent union or federation produces policy documents articulating a collective WFH worker perspective. This absence reflects the very dynamics this paper critiques. WFH is discursively constructed as an individualized, flexible arrangement, which militates against collective organizing. The atomization of WFH workers, dispersed across private homes and often lacking workplace-based solidarity, reproduces the conditions that make collective voice difficult. Consequently, this section focuses on domestic worker movements, while acknowledging that the absence of comparable WFH worker organizing is itself a political effect of the discourses analysed above.

Politicizing 'home' as workplaces

Where multilateral policy discourse treats domestic labour as an informal or residual category outside formal definitions of work, the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF) asserts a fundamental counter-position: domestic workers are workers whose labour sustains economies and households alike. As one early statement declared:

For far too long there has been a reluctance around the world to recognise that what domestic workers do in the homes of others is really 'work', and that those who do it are really 'workers'. domestic workers are not 'helpers'; we are not 'maids'; and we are not servants. Certainly none of us should be slaves. We are 'workers.' (IDWN 2011)

This reframing directly challenges the colonial/modern gender system (Lugones 2007), which has historically positioned colonised women as caregivers and reproductive labourers outside the realm of 'real' labour. IDWF questions the labelling of domestic work as 'unskilled', arguing that such narratives legitimize exploitation:

Despite performing a huge range of skilled tasks around the home, domestic work is often dismissed as “unskilled” work that people, predominately women, are naturally born knowing how to do, a convenient narrative to justify underpayment and lack of decent working conditions. Domestic work exists in a space between a service that was ‘traditionally’ unpaid and the booming care sector that – especially post-COVID - is considered essential. In this grey area, the skills needed to perform domestic work, including providing care within the home, are often denied, and almost always undervalued. (IDWF 2024: 7)

This assertion directly counters the ILO's framing of domestic workers as positioned at the margins of the care economy, valued primarily for enabling others' productivity (ILO 2021b: 34). Where the ILO sees domestic work as "maintenance of households and well-being of families," IDWF insists on its centrality to the entire economic system. The positioning of domestic work in the in-between zone of the 'traditional unpaid work and care sector' is called into question to challenge the devaluation of domestic work. COVID-19, rather than resolving this devaluation, is seen to have exacerbated it. IDWF problematizes home and domestic work as contested spaces with differential power relations that are invisibilised through notions of family, relationships, and generosity (IDWN 2011). IDWF contests the 'family' rhetoric that masks exploitation arguing that “this is not a relationship of equals ... this ‘family’ relationship can be used to mask the unjust ways in which we are made to live and work” (IDWN 2011: 4). By reasserting their worker identity, IDWF transforms domestic work from an act of familial intimacy to one of political and economic agency. Thereby contesting the spatial codes that structure labour recognition (England/Lawson 2005). IDWF implicitly highlights the gendered public-intimate binaries to re-politicize the domestic sphere:

We are the ‘oil in the wheels’ and, without us, many societies and economies simply could not function. but why so many do not see this or fail to accept the fact that they are therefore employers – with the duties of employers towards their workers - remains something that we still have to solve. Of course, its roots lie in cultures – and therefore societies and economies – that see women’s roles as less ‘productive’, less ‘significant’, than men’s. We need more proactive public awareness-raising to shift such out-dated attitudes. (IDWN 2011: 4)

In contrast to the ILO's positioning of domestic work to be necessary for 'maintenance of households and the well-being of families', IDWF positions domestic work at the centre of the social and economic system while also problematizing the gendered devaluation of such labour. By insisting on the recognition of domestic work as skilled and professional, IDWF destabilises the productive/reproductive binary at the heart of capitalist labour regimes.

Problematizing structural and institutional power

IDWF advances a powerful critique of the structural configurations that produce domestic labour as invisible, precarious, and excluded from legal and social protections. While multilateral policy frameworks often localise the 'problem' of domestic work in the individual and informal employment relationships or within cultural norms of intimacy, IDWF redirects attention to the institutional and economic architectures that systemically devalue and exclude domestic

workers. The fundamental 'problem' is located in economic and social structures, not in workers' deficits. This is evident in IDWF's critique of social protection systems. IDWF argues that the "rampant flaw in labour laws and the structure of the economy is that it does not recognize domestic workers as workers," leaving them with no "infrastructure of work-related social protection or care to fall back on" (IDWF 2021: 9). Their analysis dissects social protection into three components—social services, social assistance, and social insurance—and demonstrates how each systematically excludes domestic workers:

First, when care institutions are privatized, low-waged workers, such as domestic workers, cannot access social services. [...] Second, when governments narrow social assistance and only provide it to select vulnerable groups... During the pandemic, most domestic workers did not receive aid. [...] And third, when domestic work is not recognized at work, the sector does not qualify for social insurance. (IDWF 2021: 9)

This analysis stands in sharp contrast to the multilateral policymaking tendency to treat informality as a regulatory gap to be closed through training or incremental legal reforms. IDWF's critique reveals that the exclusion of domestic workers from social protection is a design feature of economies that treat social reproduction as a private, rather than public, responsibility. The state's failure to recognize domestic workers is a systemic logic rendering their needs unintelligible within dominant policy frameworks. The domestic sphere has been systematically depoliticized and privatized (Segato 2022). IDWF reframes this depoliticization as a direct result of interconnected structural exclusions. The structural devaluation of domestic workers, privatization of care institutions, and exclusionary social assistance produces a vicious cycle that entrenches informality and state-sanctioned neglect.

IDWF further situates these exclusions within transnational economic systems. It argues that the "migration cycle of domestic workers in Asia is not solely prompted by individual financial need but is rather a result of an intricate web of governmental policies, economic, demographic and climate fluctuations" (IDWF 2021: 11–12). Remittances from migrant domestic workers constitute a significant portion of GDP in countries such as Sri Lanka, the Philippines, and Nepal, yet the labour that produces these flows is systematically devalued. Governments "push women to migrate" through labour market designs that sustain gender wage gaps and limit women's access to land, credit, and education, thus, deliberately excluding them from the local economy while depending on their remittances (IDWF 2021: 11–12). This illustrates how the global economy structurally depends on the labour of women from the Global South, while actively producing their exclusion from national economic participation. IDWF problematizes domestic work as a 'problem' of gendered, colonial, class- and caste-based disposability (Banday/Dixit 2024; Dixit/Banday 2025), what Gutiérrez Rodríguez (2010) terms the 'racialised affective labour economy.' IDWF's interventions thus problematise the very foundations of labour regimes that treat social reproduction as a private matter or cultural practice. They outline systemic change through a reframing of institutional responsibility:

First, a social security scheme is often contributory, where it exists, between governments, employers, and workers. With the existing infrastructure of care, where care services are privatized, where low-waged workers cannot access healthcare and education for themselves and their families, a social security system that asks them for an

additional expense is discouraging. A contribution from domestic workers to social security schemes is an unaffordable commitment. Second, despite, social assistance being a non-contributory governmental aid form, it is inaccessible to domestic workers because it does not include labor-centric definition of vulnerability. This means that these services, such as unemployment stipends, disregard the precarious nature of informal employment. Third and last, social services is where the traditional understanding of the care economy intersects with domestic workers, for the institutional services of care must be provided at affordable costs for all. Investing in care means investing in its accessibility and fighting back privatization. It is possible based on a progressive taxation system. (IDWF 2021: 16)

IDWF's articulation of a new care economy is epistemological. It calls for a paradigm in which the home, the care worker, and the informal sector are recognised as structural anchors of the global economy. IDWF's demand that "economists must follow the lead of the workers, women, People of Color, migrants, people from the Global South in understanding what prosperity truly signifies" (IDWF 2021: 17) is an epistemic intervention that pushes beyond the inclusionary logic of recognition and toward a deeper reordering of political and economic value. It insists that knowledge about economic justice must be grounded in the lived experiences of those whose labour sustains economies yet remains structurally devalued.

Embedding intersectionality

While multilateral policy documents often frame domestic workers as a monolithic category, the IDWF develops a deeply intersectional critique, recognising that workers' conditions are shaped by interlocked structures of inequality. In contrast to frameworks that centre only gender or class, IDWF foregrounds how race, caste, religion, migrant status, and legal precarity shape differential vulnerabilities across contexts. Their approach echoes Black, Dalit, and decolonial feminist analyses of labour as differentiated by histories of disposability and racial-gendered-caste hierarchies (Lugones 2007; Guru 1995; Rege 1998; Wilkerson 2020; Davis 1983). This complexity is visible in how IDWF distinguishes between employment arrangements and their consequences:

Certain categories of DWs face greater disadvantages. Live-in DWs experience more isolation, less privacy and more limited mobility, work longer hours, and receive a larger share of payments in kind (such as meals and accommodation). Living conditions are frequently poor. They are also more vulnerable to physical/sexual abuse by employers compared to liveout DWs. Many DWs face multiple forms of discrimination due to their gender, race, ethnicity, class, and other individual characteristics that "intersect" with one another and overlap. (IDWF 2024: 8)

Where multilateral reports reduce intersectionality to a checklist of demographic categories (ILO 2021b: 11), IDWF operationalizes it as an analytic by showing how live-in status, migrant legal status, caste, and race co-constitute specific forms of disposability. Far from being surface intersectionality, this is a substantive, structural critique. Rather than essentializing domestic workers, IDWF situates them within differentiated regimes of marginality, shaped by spatial arrangements (live-in vs. live-out), legal status, and social position. IDWF explicitly engages

with the politics of intersectionality (Collins/Bilge 2016), recognizing differential marginalization across contexts. For instance, in South Asia:

Issues of class, caste, and even religious belonging feed into the racism: urban employers spray disinfectant over the bodies of rural domestic workers who desire to return to their villages but are stuck in the cities under lockdown. In South Asia, caste plays into the perception of “untouchability,” a racist/classist standard that distinguishes and discriminates between people. Aside from descentance and ancestry, “lower-castes” have been shaped by their occupation, usually jobs that are understood today as 3D: dirty, demeaning, and dangerous. The category includes many sectors of the informal economy such as domestic work. (IDWF 2021: 11)

Such intersectional problematization aligns with anti-caste and critical race feminist critiques that position caste/race as both an occupational ordering and a spatial regime, where domestic work is devalued and marked as morally and ritually contaminating (Acciari 2019; Gopal 2013; Nair/Hofman 2022). Problematizing these situated regimes of power (Dixit 2026) is important to address the exploitation of domestic workers in different contexts rather than merely assuming only gendered and class-based disparities in domestic work. IDWF's regional analysis further demonstrates this intersectional approach. IDWF maps how different histories of colonialism, slavery, and patriarchal governance produce distinct configurations of exploitation:

DWs are a growing but mostly invisible workforce in Europe, and they are extremely vulnerable to gross exploitation. In Latin America, many DWs are Afro-descendants or indigenous people who often face multiple forms of discrimination. In Africa and the Caribbean domestic work has been impacted by colonialism and poverty, racial inequality, and patriarchal systems. The majority of DWs in the Arab States and Southeast Asia are migrants, many of them facing different forms of hardship. In most Arab countries, despite coming as workers, migrant DWs (MDWs) are exempted from labor protections and locked into a system that has been likened to ‘modern day slavery’ through a sponsorship modality called Kafala. (IDWF 2024: 5–6)

Here, IDWF offers a relational reading of power: one that sees domestic work as a transnational site where the legacies of slavery, colonialism, caste, and patriarchal governance converge. In refusing liberal narratives of empowerment that rest on universal categories like “woman” or “worker,” IDWF foregrounds embodied difference, historicised disposability, and the co-constitution of labour regimes across borders. This challenges existing policy imaginaries and opens possibilities for cross-border solidarities rooted in the lived experience of those whose work makes the world possible.

In summary, domestic worker movements, particularly the IDWF, offer three interconnected counter-problematisations. First, they repoliticise the home as a workplace, insisting that labour in the domestic sphere is no less legitimate than labour in formal workplaces. Second, they relocate the ‘problem’ from individual deficits to institutional design, revealing how social protection systems, labour laws, and transnational economic arrangements systematically exclude domestic workers. Third, they embed intersectionality substantively rather than performatively, showing how caste, race, migrant status, and live-in arrangements co-constitute specific forms of disposability across different contexts.

Conclusion

This paper has examined how global policy discourse constructs 'work from home' (WFH) and domestic work, and how those constructions rest on and reproduce colonial, gendered, and caste racial hierarchies that depoliticize the home as a workplace. This research is urgent because the post-pandemic normalization of WFH, alongside the ongoing devaluation of domestic labour, is hardening into laws, budgets, and managerial practices that could lock in a new cycle of gendered colonial inequality if left unchallenged. Using Bacchi's WPR approach, we treated policy as a discursive technology rather than a 'neutral' description of reality. Reading eleven reports from multilateral institutions alongside documents from the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), we traced how problem representations are constituted through specific presuppositions about what counts as work, where work takes place, and who is legible as a worker. In our analysis of policy documents from multilateral institutions, we examined how work is constructed in ways that exclude social reproduction from the realm of value, and how domestic labour is persistently situated outside of the sphere of production. This paper, then, turns to grassroots feminist organising, especially the International Domestic Workers Federation (IDWF), as sites of alternative epistemologies.

This paper makes three interconnected contributions. Conceptually, we bring feminist, decolonial, and anti-caste scholarship into conversation with policy analysis, demonstrating how the productive/reproductive and public/private binaries are active governance tools. Methodologically, we extend Bacchi's WPR framework to reveal what we term "surface intersectionality", which is a policy tool that enumerates gendered and classed disparities while leaving their colonial-caste-racial foundations unexamined. Empirically, by reading multilateral policy texts against documents produced by domestic worker unions, we surface an epistemic struggle over the very category of work and over the boundaries of the home as a governable workplace. In doing so, we show that achieving labour justice requires including domestic work in existing frameworks and dismantling the gendered-colonial logics that structure those frameworks.

Our analysis highlights three key findings. First, multilateral policy texts represent WFH as a question of flexibility, visibility, and productivity, presuming a disembodied, digitally enabled worker whose social reproduction is either irrelevant or individually manageable. Second, the multilateral policy texts frame domestic labour as a deficit of formality, skill, or regulation, thereby locating the 'problem' in workers and policy fixes rather than in the structures that produce those conditions. Third, intersectionality appears largely at the surface level. Gender and class are enumerated, while the colonial-caste-racial logics that sort bodies into productive/reproductive roles, and Global North/Global South labour regimes, remain unexamined. Such problematizations result in specific policy effects, including that domestic and care work is produced to be supportive of the transnational economy rather than central to it; social protection for domestic workers is tolerated as emergency relief; and the private household is reaffirmed as an intimate space rather than a political site of labour.

The WFH subject emerges as the self-responsibilised, always-available worker who must reconcile blurred boundaries without burdening employers or the state. The domestic worker subject appears as the grateful beneficiary of training and incremental inclusion, valued for enabling others' productivity rather than for her own skilled, world-making labour. Employers

are cast as private householders, who are at worst under-informed, and at best benevolent, rather than as employers embedded in legal and fiscal relations. The state is positioned as guardian of market efficiency, not as guarantor of social reproduction. These subject positions narrow the imaginable horizons of reform and obscure the structural violences that organise labour globally.

In contrast, the alternative problematisations articulated by domestic worker movements, especially the IDWF, repoliticise the home as a workplace, insist on domestic work as skilled labour, and relocate the 'problem' from individual informality to institutional design. They foreground how privatised care regimes, contribution-based social insurance, and developmentalist metrics collectively exclude workers deemed peripheral. Crucially, they embed intersectionality substantively rather than performatively, articulating caste, race, migrant and legal status, and live-in arrangements as co-constitutive of disposability and harm. In doing so, they offer policy demands (legal recognition, enforceable labour standards, de-privatised social services, progressive taxation) as epistemic interventions that center the voice of workers.

These insights point to a different policy horizon. De-precaritising domestic labour and re-defining WFH cannot be accomplished by incremental regulation or skills programmes alone. They require (i) recognising the home as a workplace in law and enforcement, with clear employer obligations; (ii) building universal, de-privatised care and social protection systems financed through progressive taxation rather than contributory schemes that exclude low-wage workers; (iii) redistributing care through leave policies, shorter work weeks, and incentives that target men's uptake rather than treating childcare as a market fix and a gendered problem; (iv) embedding intersectional accountability (caste, race, migrant status, live-in status) in inspection, data, and remedy, not just in rhetoric.

Finally, this analysis opens several directions for future research. First, comparative studies of how WFH reorganises social reproduction across classed and caste households in the Global South can clarify the distributional consequences of digital flexibilisation. Second, coalition-based research with domestic worker unions can translate alternative epistemologies into enforceable policy designs and budget architectures. This study has several limitations that point toward future research. First, our corpus is limited to English-language policy documents produced by global institutions and transnational worker organizations. This focus necessarily omits national-level policy debates, regional variations in discourse, and the rich texture of organizing at local scales. Second, the absence of organized WFH worker voices means our comparison is necessarily partial; we have analysed how WFH is constructed in policy, but not how WFH workers themselves might contest or reframe those constructions. Future research might explore emerging forms of collective organizing among remote and platform-mediated workers. Third, our analysis focuses on discourse rather than material outcomes or policy implementation. While we argue that discourse shapes material realities, further research could trace how the problematizations we identify translate into budget allocations, enforcement practices, and lived experiences of workers. Finally, while we have emphasized the co-constitution of caste, race, and gender, our analysis remains necessarily schematic; deeper empirical work is needed on how these regimes operate in specific national and regional contexts.

In conclusion, to take WFH and domestic work seriously is to refuse the binaries that make one legible as "productive" and the other as "intimate." By merely quantifying disparities and

prescribing technocratic fixes, policy texts overlook the historical and discursive practices through which certain forms of labour have been devalued and rendered invisible (Segato 2022; Lugones 2007). Policies that centre social reproduction, follow workers' knowledge, and reassign obligations to employers and the state can begin to dismantle the colonial gender logics that underwrite the global division of labour.

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