

# Editorial: Challenging the Boundaries of Care Work: Gendered violence, intimate labour, and migration

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## Abstract

This Editorial introduces a Special Issue of *Anti-Trafficking Review*, focusing on the intersecting themes of care work, intimate labour, migration, and exploitation.

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## Introduction

This Special Issue of *Anti-Trafficking Review* was prompted by a provocation to push forward the ways in which we consider gendered labour and gendered violence as experienced by women more generally, and migrant women more specifically. Policy and regulatory responses have tended to construct women's experiences through prevailing frames of violence against women (i.e. violence enacted by intimate partners that happens in private), or labour exploitation (i.e. violence enacted by employers/senior colleagues that happens in the workplace), as though they are distinct and separate matters. At the same time, the intertwining of exploitation, caring relations, and intimacy within care work and intimate labour, and manifold ways in which these aspects are central to women's work, have been rendered invisible, and thus, remained largely unprotected in labour and migration system settings. There is a substantial body of scholarship and activism that focuses on labour rights, women migrant workers, and migrant care work more broadly. However, there are gendered aspects of labour and women's experiences of violence and exploitation that we need to illuminate and continue to wrestle with. These aspects pose a challenge to the accounting for this work, as well as give rise to the discomfort in labelling and recognising care and intimacy as aspects of labour, given their gendered and familial associations with ways of caring and being (i.e. as extensions of mothering).

We invited articles that sought to push these boundaries from a range of perspectives. This culminated in an issue that collectively offers important insights and extends our purview of the complexities that characterise the intersections of intimacy, care, and work. Drawing on different theoretical perspectives and empirical datasets, these articles further offer key considerations around the continuities of violence and exploitation in women migrant workers' lives, as well as the implications of these intersections for how to protect and enable their rights. We focus specifically on three themes that come to the fore in this issue: first, the persistence of gendered violence in care work and intimate labour. Second, the ways in which affective relationalities in the worker–employer relationships impact on various dynamics of labour. Further, how intimacies are enabled and relied upon, whilst equally being denied and devalued in these settings. And third, how violence affects so many aspects of women's lives that violence in the workplace as well as public or private settings is not usefully distinguished or distinguishable. This is not least because of the ways in which all forms of violence, including domestic and family violence, as well as class, caste, racial, and religious discrimination impact on women's daily lives. Taken together, what is clear is that research that examines the complexities and entanglements of gender, violence, intimacy, and care work is critical to challenging and exposing the gaps in systems that continually attempt to produce clear demarcations in what is or is not 'counted' as work, as violence, or as exploitation. This must continue to be challenged in order to more comprehensively work towards addressing exploitation and gendered violence in their myriad forms.

## Persistence of Violence and Exploitation in Care Work and Intimate Labour

The 'crisis of care'<sup>1</sup> and the concomitant reliance on poor, racialised, and migrant women to provide care and reproductive labour in private households is a story that is now all too familiar to us. Data from the International Labour Organization (ILO) indicate that migrants constitute a significant proportion<sup>2</sup> of the global care economy, and the vast majority of them are migrant women working in long-term residential care facilities and home-based care services, including as domestic workers. At the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, there was global recognition of frontline migrant care workers, particularly those employed in healthcare, as an essential labour force.

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<sup>1</sup> E Dowling, *The care crisis: What caused it and how can we end it?*, Verso, London and New York, 2021, p. 12.

<sup>2</sup> See N Popova and A Rakotonarivo, *ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers: International migrants in the labour force (4th Edition)*, International Labour Organization, Geneva, 2024, p. 16, <https://www.ilo.org/publications/major-publications/ilo-global-estimates-international-migrants-labour-force>.

However, the pandemic also acutely exposed the scale of risks and harms that migrants in care work, especially migrant women in home-based care, are routinely subjected to.<sup>3</sup> For example, studies had documented how travel restrictions and lockdown measures, implemented to prevent the spread of the virus, led to a deterioration in their working and living conditions (e.g. extended working hours, long periods of confinement in employers' households, exacerbated constraints on workers' mobility, and increased social isolation).<sup>4</sup> Notwithstanding the unequal impacts to migrant care workers and inequitable working conditions that they had to navigate during the pandemic, this was not a sudden disruption from an otherwise well-functioning employment context.<sup>5</sup> Rather, as Schillinger, Schwiter, and Steiner observed, 'in many care jobs, the purported "normal" was already a crisis situation, as the status quo in care work had never reflected labour standards expected and upheld in other employment fields.'<sup>6</sup>

This is clearly exemplified in the short article by **Sifat Aiman** in this Special Issue, which describes how the 'dual abandonment' of women migrant domestic workers by employers *and* governments during armed conflict is not an isolated event or individual misfortune. Instead, she argues that it needs to be understood against the latent violence that is embedded in care labour and migration structures, which traps women migrant domestic workers in a systemic zone of non-responsibility. In this context, abandonment during armed conflict becomes a predictable outcome rather than an isolated or unfortunate accident. **Runa Lazzarino, Eleonore Kofman, and Sobia Kapadia's** examination of migrant Filipina domestic workers' employment experiences in Pakistan illustrates a similar point. They note that situations such as the intensification of workloads and increased restrictions on women's mobility during the pandemic could occur because the women were required by labour migration regulations to work and live in employers' homes. Thus, the pandemic simply exacerbated a 'crisis situation' that had already existed.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> L Foley and N Piper, *COVID-19 and women migrant workers: Impacts and implications*, International Organization of Migration, Geneva, 2020, retrieved 10 August 2026, <https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/covid19-and-women.pdf>.

<sup>4</sup> J Ham, 'Anti-pandemic measures, labour rights, and the legibility of harm in domestic work', in P Davis and M Rowe (eds.), *Criminology of the Domestic*, Routledge, New York and Abingdon, 2023, pp. 117–134.

<sup>5</sup> S Schillinger, K Schwiter, and J Steiner, 'Care crises and care fixes under COVID-19: The example of transnational live-in care work', *Social & Cultural Geography*, vol. 24, issue 3–4, 2023, pp. 391–408, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14649365.2022.2073608>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Foley and Piper.

The prevalence and persistence of violence and exploitation experienced by migrant women in care work is well established. An extensive body of empirical research has documented wage theft; overwork; passport confiscation; restricted mobility and communication; physical, verbal, and sexual violence; as well as legal dependency on employers.<sup>8</sup> In seeking to understand the factors that contribute to, sustain, and normalise the exploitation of migrant care workers, scholars and labour rights activists have highlighted the importance of framing women's experiences against the structural interplay of exclusionary labour laws,<sup>9</sup> restrictive migration regimes,<sup>10</sup> and gendered norms that inform the standards and expectations of the care industry.<sup>11</sup> While much of the focus has predominantly been on migrant women employed as live-in domestic workers, there are critical lessons that are equally applicable to other forms of care and reproductive work as well as, more broadly, feminised industries that are characterised by the commodification of 'intimate labour'.<sup>12</sup>

One of the lessons is the need to formally recognise these forms of labour as 'genuine work' (rather than 'love work' performed out of affection or for altruism and emotional fulfilment) and, accordingly, ensure that migrant care workers possess equal contractual and labour rights as other workers.<sup>13</sup> While the inclusion within labour law frameworks does not erase other migration-related issues with access and awareness,<sup>14</sup> clear legal definitions constituting acceptable conditions of work and standards of employment can allow for a stronger legibility of harms in these employment contexts.<sup>15</sup> This, in turn, creates space for individual

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<sup>8</sup> B Anderson, *Worker, helper, auntie, maid?: Working conditions and attitudes experienced by migrant domestic workers in Thailand and Malaysia*, International Labour Organization, Bangkok, 2016.

<sup>9</sup> V Mantouvalou, 'Human rights for precarious workers: The legislative precariousness of domestic labor', *Comparative Labour Law & Policy Journal*, vol. 34, issue 1, 2012, pp. 133–165.

<sup>10</sup> B Anderson, 'Migration, immigration controls and the fashioning of precarious workers', *Work, Employment and Society*, vol. 24, issue 2, 2010, pp. 300–317, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0950017010362141>.

<sup>11</sup> D K Barker, 'Querying the paradox of caring labor', *Rethinking Marxism: A Journal of Economics, Culture & Society*, vol. 24, issue 4, 2012, pp. 574–591, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08935696.2012.711065>.

<sup>12</sup> E Boris and R S Parreñas, 'Introduction', in E Boris and R S Parreñas (eds.), *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010, pp. 1–12.

<sup>13</sup> J Fudge, 'Feminist reflections on the scope of labour law: Domestic work, social reproduction and jurisdiction', *Feminist Legal Studies*, vol. 22, 2014, pp. 1–23, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10691-014-9256-2>.

<sup>14</sup> Anderson, 2010.

<sup>15</sup> Mantouvalou.

or collective contestation against exploitation and violence experienced by care workers.<sup>16</sup>

The need for robust legal and regulatory responses is raised in several articles in this Special Issue. For example, **Anakha Ajith's** article explores how the absence of clear employment standards for in-home domestic and care workers in Kerala (and India more broadly) translated to a significant ambiguity both in relation to scope of responsibilities as well as the degree of control and surveillance that employers had over in-home caregivers. The author notes that, while there are piecemeal initiatives in the form of minimum wage notifications, inclusion within workplace sexual harassment legislation, and attempts to professionalise the private eldercare sector, there is no central legislation that clearly demarcates the household as a workplace or affords workers enforceable labour rights. Drawing on interviews with women employed as in-home caregivers for elderly persons, Ajith notes that within this fragmented legal regulatory context, gendered moralities of care and expectations of altruism sit alongside poor employment standards (i.e. low wages, long working hours, and restricted mobility) to frame the parameters of work and working conditions.

Focusing on surrogates in Greece, **Athena Michalakea and Anastasia Rousaki's** article undertakes a case law analysis approach and argues for the need to shift away from current legal constructions of surrogacy as an altruistic, non-commercial, and consensual act. The authors note that this framework effectively erases surrogates' labour and obscures the risks and harms they experience, which undermines the stated objective of safeguarding surrogates from exploitation. Likewise, in their comparative analysis of domestic work and sex work, **Isotta Rossoni and Begoña Aramayona** note that while violence is a structural possibility for both sex workers and domestic workers in Spain, Italy, and Malta, the distinct regulatory regimes of both sectors have differentially shaped how labour, intimacy, and exploitation are constructed, understood, and responded to by workers in these sectors. Based on interviews with over 50 migrants who had worked either as sex workers or domestic/care workers, the authors further found that respondents' migration status directly shaped their capacity to report exploitation and violence, change jobs or employers, as well as negotiate boundaries and working conditions.

Migration status and restrictive migration systems create the conditions and leverage for gendered violence<sup>17</sup> and labour exploitation.<sup>18</sup> In this Special Issue, **Lubna Jebin and JaneMaree Maher** examine how the *kafala* system in Saudi

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> M Segrave and S Vasil, *The borders of violence: Temporary migration and domestic and family violence*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2025, p. 57.

<sup>18</sup> Anderson, 2010.

Arabia contributes to ongoing and persistent forms of exploitation and violence of other systems and constrains the ways in which Bangladeshi migrant domestic workers navigate and negotiate their safety and security. They explore these issues through qualitative interviews with 18 returnees, detailing both the significant exploitation they experienced (i.e. economic, physical, and sexual violence) and the ways in which they asserted agency and resistance. Specifically, the authors map how the *kafala* system institutionalises women's precarity by granting employers absolute legal authority over their mobility and legal status in the country. This systemic control manifests inside the home workplace as a repetitive assertion of dominance, weaving structural and physical violence into the very fabric of everyday care and domestic work.

Drawing on Galtung's framework of structural violence, **Aiman's** article, too, reveals how dual abandonment of women migrant domestic workers is a direct consequence of the migration regime. She highlights how the process for repatriating or evacuating women during armed conflicts is complicated because their passports or other travel documents were confiscated by employers during peacetime.

Bringing a different perspective, **Isla Mairi Wilson and Yuniar Paramita Sari's** research with employers of migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong reveals how the labour migration regime provides leverage for employers to control workers' time and personal autonomy and normalises exploitative conditions despite migrant domestic workers' de jure protection under Hong Kong law. Together, these articles offer a critical examination of structural conditions which are producing and sustaining violence that is largely unseen and occurs as a consequence of these structural conditions.

## Centring Affective Relationality and Intimacy in Responses to Exploitation

Another issue that sits at the centre of longstanding feminist debates and discussions is the complex interplay between intimacy, affective relationalities in worker–employer relationships, and exploitation. On one hand, scholars have argued that the asymmetrical power relations in these employment relationships mean that intimacy and affective relations can become levers to exploit migrant women.<sup>19</sup> For example, studies with women migrant domestic workers have shown how the language of 'familial inclusion' can be selectively invoked to

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<sup>19</sup> M de la Luz Ibarra, 'My reward is not money: Deep alliances and end-of-life care among Mexicana workers and their wards', in E Boris and R S Parreñas (eds.), *Intimate Labors: Cultures, Technologies, and the Politics of Care*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2010, pp. 117–131.

secure workers' emotional commitment to the household and withdrawn at the employers' discretion.<sup>20</sup> On the other hand, there is also recognition of how migrant women strategically and actively deploy intimacy and affective relationalities (e.g. being part of the family) within the workplace to subvert employers' authority and control,<sup>21</sup> as well as obtain tangible benefits (e.g. contract renewals, regular pay, stronger bargaining power) and immaterial rewards (e.g. feeling respected, being treated with empathy and understanding).<sup>22</sup> As Anderson aptly articulates, 'homes are spaces of emotion, they are not just where jobs get done, and these emotions are not simply extras but go to the heart of the employment relation.'<sup>23</sup>

Current labour laws and migration policies sustain conditions for exploitation as they remain fundamentally limited by their failure to account for these relational dynamics that shape the nature of care work and intimate labour.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, there is a structural reliance on the gendered logics of intimacy, love, and familial obligations within employment relationships to sustain the global care economy.<sup>25</sup> In normalising what would be considered unacceptable labour standards in other contexts as 'part of the job' and expecting women care workers to negotiate their terms of employment, current policy and regulatory frameworks ignore how intimacy and the intimate nature of home-workplaces fundamentally alter everyday power relations.<sup>26</sup> This has particular implications for migrant women who are already experiencing significant intersectional disadvantages in relation to gender, class, race, caste, nationality, and legal status. In this way, existing policy discourses fail to recognise how emotional ties, spatial isolation, and personal dependencies are leveraged to enforce migrant women's subordination.

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<sup>20</sup> Anderson, 2016.

<sup>21</sup> R S Parreñas, *Servants of Globalization: Women, Migration and Domestic Work*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, 2015, p. 150.

<sup>22</sup> S J Tan, *Gendered labour, everyday security and migration: An examination of domestic work and domestic workers' experiences in Singapore and Hong Kong*, Routledge, Abingdon and New York, 2023, p. 152.

<sup>23</sup> Anderson, 2016, p. 44.

<sup>24</sup> F Robinson, 'Beyond labour rights: The ethics of care and women's work in the global economy', *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, vol. 8, issue 3, 2006, pp. 321–342, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616740600792871>.

<sup>25</sup> N Schoenbaum, 'The law of intimate work', *Washington Law Review*, vol. 90, issue 3, 2015, pp. 1167–1244.

<sup>26</sup> S J Tan, 'When the home is also the workplace: Women migrant domestic workers' experiences with the "live-in" policy in Singapore and Hong Kong', *Anti-Trafficking Review*, issue 20, 2023, pp. 75–91, <https://doi.org/10.14197/atr.201223205>.

Critically, when the harms that women experience are disregarded and remain illegible within current policy and regulatory frameworks, it negatively impacts the allocation of resources and stymies efforts to address these issues.<sup>27</sup> While critical feminist research has documented how women's claims for legal recognition often require problematic demands on the part of women to become 'worthy' victims, it has also recognised that legal legibility (i.e. the formal recognition of harms) is intertwined with access to resources.<sup>28</sup> In the space of care work and intimate labour, legal *illegibility* associated with these forms of gendered labour means that women must continuously negotiate, adapt, and resist these conditions without effective formal support or legal protections.<sup>29</sup> Further, as women's everyday strategies of survival and workplace negotiation have mostly existed outside traditional labour rights paradigms,<sup>30</sup> regulatory and policy frameworks have largely dismissed these relational realities as peripheral, private matters that are 'part of the job'.<sup>31</sup> This then contributes to an erasure or disregard for the systemic and structural nature of exploitation and violence that is embedded within normative gendered standards and performances of labour.<sup>32</sup>

These unresolved tensions around the circulation of intimacy and affective relationalities, and what they mean for how we make legible and respond to the risks and harms that cut across the traditional public–private/labour–love divide, are also explored in this Special Issue. They are clearly exemplified in the short article by **Jonathan Blagbrough and Tsion Degu**, which focuses on child domestic labour. Drawing on the learnings from an NGO project in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, the authors note that, because of the way in which children enter into live-in domestic labour and the nature of their employment, protection efforts need to focus on relational and social environments that shape the everyday working and living conditions of child domestic workers. Similarly, **Rossoni and Aramayona's** article describes the skill and effort involved in performing

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<sup>27</sup> Ham, p. 118.

<sup>28</sup> P.L. Sweet, 'The paradox of legibility: Domestic violence and institutional survivorhood', *Social Problems*, vol. 66, issue 3, 2019, pp. 411–427, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spy012>.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> It is important to note here that on the national and supra-national level, there are key networks of labour activism, primarily led by women migrant workers who have campaigned and mobilised for stronger rights and welfare. This has led to the passage of the ILO's *Domestic Workers Convention* (C189) and the accompanying non-binding Recommendation (R201) in 2011. However, the Convention has been ratified by only 40 countries, and many migrant-receiving jurisdictions, such as Singapore, Saudi Arabia, Hong Kong, and the United Kingdom, have not yet ratified it.

<sup>31</sup> Tan, *Gendered labour, everyday security and migration*, p. 139.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

‘authentic’ intimate and affective engagement in sex and domestic work, rendering it a professionally practised form of relational labour. At the same time, the authors reflect on how the performance of intimate labour and affective engagement can lead to clients or employers overstepping or violating work agreements, while also being employed by workers to negotiate boundaries and resist exploitation.

The weaponisation of fictive kinship by employers and employment agencies to facilitate exploitative and affective violence against women migrant workers was also a core thematic focus in other articles. Drawing on an intimate labour lens, **Jebin and Maher** unpack how intimacy and the intimate nature of the domestic workplace facilitate violence that is often obscured in traditional labour law and migration frameworks. They note how women’s precarity is structurally embedded in restrictive migration rules and further initiated prior to departure through unregulated recruitment networks as well as a lack of effective training that is responsive to women’s lived experiences. In the absence of adequate support and accessible legal protections, women manage violent and exploitative working conditions not through formal complaint mechanisms but by strategically ‘absorbing’ harm and reframing contractual disputes into personal, affective negotiations to ensure their income, safety, and security.

Within such workplaces where care work and intimate labour are performed, fictive kinship and the leveraging of intimacy and affective relationalities with employers becomes a strategy that women use to negotiate their safety and security, especially in the absence of equitable and accessible legal protections.<sup>33</sup> By positioning themselves as ‘part of the family’, women workers attempt to transform an unequal labour relationship into a moral contract grounded in personal/familial obligation and care.<sup>34</sup> In the isolated setting of home-workplaces where reminders of contractual obligations and monetary remunerations can stir up uneasiness,<sup>35</sup> such strategic performances of familial kinship and leveraging intimacy can serve as a protective mechanism. It allows women to negotiate responsibilities, navigate workplace conflict, secure regular income, and mitigate the risk of physical, verbal, and sexual violence, and of the sudden loss of employment.

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> B S A Yeoh *et al.*, ‘Migrant domestic workers and the household division of intimate labour: Reconfiguring eldercare relations in Singapore’, *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 30, issue 5, 2023, pp. 619–637, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2021.1956435>.

<sup>35</sup> K Wee *et al.*, ‘Love’s labour’s cost? Gendered migration and intimate labour in Asia’, *Gender, Place & Culture: A Journal of Feminist Geography*, vol. 30, issue 5, 2023, pp. 609–618, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2023.2179025>.

However, while invoking pseudo-familial ties can sometimes be a crucial survival mechanism, a closer interrogation of how fictive kinship and affective relationalities are deployed exposes the mechanism's fragility. It is often a one-way street where women are expected to give without being reciprocated, and this is especially evident when we look at employers' attitudes to workers. Empirical evidence of this fragility is highlighted in **Wilson and Sari's** article on the perceptions and attitudes of employers of women migrant domestic workers in Hong Kong. Drawing on survey data and semi-structured interviews, the authors demonstrate that even when employers construct or explain the employment dynamic through a familial rather than a contractual lens, these affective framings rarely translate into equitable labour practices. Instead, employers' expectations of familial reciprocity sit alongside racialised stereotypes, exclusionary beliefs, and controlling attitudes to position women as subordinate to their own needs. Importantly, the article illustrates the limitations of familial kinship and the leveraging of intimacy and affective relationalities for migrant women's safety when such kinship co-exists with unequal employment relationships and inequitable labour conditions.

**Ajith's** article similarly exposes how women caregivers are expected to treat elderly clients 'like their own parents' yet are not afforded the same degree of care or respect but instead subjected to caste- and class-based discrimination. Building on these exclusionary logics, the illusion of familial inclusion serves to obscure systemic oppression rather than grant genuine belonging. In this article, the author demonstrates how caregivers are compelled to perform deep emotional and intimate bodily labour under the banner of kinship, while their lower-caste, working-class, or religious backgrounds are simultaneously weaponised against them. Employers exploit these socio-economic vulnerabilities, delegating dirty or demanding tasks to workers under the naturalised assumption that such labour inherently belongs to marginalised women. Thus, the rhetoric of 'family' functions purely as a mechanism of labour discipline: it demands unconditional affection and deference from caregivers while actively denying them basic labour rights, economic security, and equal human dignity within the employers' homes.

In the absence of formal legal frameworks, the quality and sustainability of live-in employment depend heavily on these affective and relational dynamics. Women workers strategically mobilise intimacy, emotional labour, and situated agency to cultivate employers' goodwill, mitigate isolation, and negotiate essential conditions such as fair rest, mobility, or dignity. Thus, 'good' employment is co-constructed through everyday intimate interactions, proving that sustainable working conditions rely as much on relational alignment as on material terms like wages.

However, as articles in this Special Issue also exemplify, intimacy and affective relationality need to be understood beyond the lens of being tools to be used either for exploitation or for resistance and as a survival strategy. In some cases, relationality and intimacy are at the core of 'good' and sustainable employment

conditions,<sup>36</sup> i.e. fair wages, reasonable working hours, and sufficient rest, which speaks to the intimate and affective dimensions of this form of employment. For example, in **Lazzarino, Kofman, and Kapadia's** article, migrant domestic workers asked migration intermediaries to intervene in matters beyond traditional labour disputes, such as isolation and emotional pressures. Similarly, **Ajith's** study highlights how women caregivers actively strive to preserve their dignity within deeply restrictive placements, framing dignity through distinctly affective and relational dimensions. Rather than viewing their work solely through the lens of hardship or submission, caregivers leverage personal integrity, emotional resilience, and quiet boundary-setting to maintain a sense of self-respect. By centring dignity in their daily interactions, caregivers demonstrate that sustainable employment relies heavily on mutual respect and affective fulfilment alongside basic material conditions.

Collectively, these articles reveal the limitations of existing system responses that are not constructed or developed to recognise the violence and harms associated with the performance of care work and intimate labour, or even the nature of these forms of employment.<sup>37</sup> Yet, we also see how gendered moralities of love and filial piety are invoked to justify the absence of protection and obfuscate the exploitation experienced by women in care work and intimate labour. Rather than offering meaningful structural protections, state policies have routinely relied on gendered, and as we have seen from articles in this Special Issue, on racialised, caste, and class-based moralities to maintain the status quo.

These issues also feature in **Sonja Dolinsek's** review of Ella Parry-Davies' book *Intimate Inequalities: Performing Migrant Domestic Work* (2025). The review highlights the book's innovative performance-based methodology, which illuminates how Filipina migrant domestic workers in Lebanon and the UK navigate and represent the complex intimacies of their lives. By incorporating this contribution, this Special Issue extends its critical engagement with the methodological, creative, and spatial dimensions of studying migrant domestic labour.

## Recognising the Intersectional Continuities of Violence in Migrant Women Care Workers' Lives

Research has pointed to the ways in which the persistent siloing of issues—for example, where labour exploitation, human trafficking, and violence against women are considered separate areas of law and policy—impedes genuine progress to women's safety, as for many women, these different forms of gendered

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<sup>36</sup> Tan, *Gendered labour, everyday security and migration*, p. 157.

<sup>37</sup> Fudge, p. 2.

violence are interconnected and ongoing.<sup>38</sup> Subsequently, even when the focus of efforts and interventions has been on women and girls, depending on how the problem is categorised (e.g. women's poverty, violence against women, or labour exploitation), it falls under the remit of different agencies with a specific focus and understanding of the problem at hand.<sup>39</sup> This obfuscates any capacity to recognise and respond to the complexity and continuity of women's experiences of violence. It also has flow-on impacts for how to investigate, respond to, and seek to prevent these forms of violence occurring in the future. In our previous research, we have also demonstrated how such siloed response mechanisms and efforts mean that women, and women migrant workers specifically, can fall through system gaps.<sup>40</sup>

The gendered, racialised and classed continuities of violence that migrant women experience as part of their everyday lives is articulated in several articles in this Special Issue. This is most clearly exemplified in the discussions and references around women's pathways into care labour. **Michalakea and Rousaki** note how economic necessity is a key determinant for women's decisions to become surrogates, with a proportion of women having had a prior employment relationship with intended parents (often as domestic workers). Yet, the Greek law has not substantively or meaningfully engaged with these pre-existing structural and relational inequalities and instead frames surrogacy through an altruistic model and moral language of gift or sacrifice.

**Jebin and Maher** evidence how employers were able to weaponise women migrant domestic workers' economic dependency to repeatedly perpetrate physical and sexual violence with impunity. Arguing that economic insecurity serves as the primary driver of harm, underpinning and compounding physical and psychological violence, their article maps how Bangladeshi women domestic workers in Saudi Arabia endured ongoing exploitation in the hope of achieving economic security. Further, women's economic (in)security, which is interwoven in their pre-migration familial circumstances, effectively creates a structural confinement that trapped them in situations of violence and exploitation. These intertwining dynamics are not adequately accounted for or recognised in regulatory policies and frameworks where the lens of 'altruism' or 'independent migration' obscures the gendered dynamic that leads to and constrains women's choices and decision-making processes.

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<sup>38</sup> M Segrave and S J Tan, 'Woman, migrant or worker? Human trafficking, violence against women and women's safety in ASEAN', *Journal of Gender-Based Violence*, vol. 9, issue 2, 2025, pp. 252–272, <https://doi.org/10.1332/23986808Y2024D000000062>.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>40</sup> Segrave and Vasil.

Likewise, for women in **Ajith's** article, financial precarity, debts and domestic violence characterised their employment pathways into live-in eldercare. The article further draws attention to how caste-based discrimination contributed to women being treated with suspicion, or simply rejected from employers' homes. The article illustrates how such attitudes intersect with social impressions that women from lower castes were better suited to perform intimate, bodily, and care labour, especially 'dirty' work. The implications of racialised discrimination and nationality-based assumptions of women's obedience and bargaining power are also accounted for in **Wilson and Sari's** analysis of employers' attitudes. Their article shows how such attitudes can contribute to the normalisation of exploitation and lower social condemnation of exploitative behaviours.

In many ways, the articles in this Special Issue broaden the focus of labour exploitation and human trafficking literature. They also reflect the pertinence of key arguments from feminist criminological scholarship wherein policy and system responses, however informed, have remained wedded to 'incident-based' understandings of violence rather than focused on the processes generating such violence.<sup>41</sup> The ineffectuality and violence of such a siloed approach is well exposed in **Aiman's** article, which details how women migrant domestic workers fall through gaps and are abandoned in moments of conflict and crisis, exposing a protection hierarchy that is based on citizenship, race, and geopolitical value.

The articles in this Special Issue as well as other research carried out by us and other feminist scholars make a clear case for more comprehensive recognition and consideration of women's safety and the need to understand their experiences of violence beyond the blinkered lens of current legal and policy response systems.

## Conclusion

The research presented in this Special Issue contributes to a growing conversation on the need for an integrated approach to understand and respond to the multidimensional nature of violence that impacts the lives of women care workers. Critically, this research sits at the intersection of where policy-makers and practitioners are often comfortable, with clear demarcations of 'problems' and 'responses'. Yet, it is sufficiently clear from the overwhelming research and evidence that there is a need to push our thinking beyond these silos. The exercise to challenge the dominant conceptualisations and understanding beyond these dimensions is not simply an exercise in theoretical or conceptual folly and novelty.

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<sup>41</sup> S Walklate, 'Life is complicated: Journeys, ghosts, liminality and policy responses to violence against women', *Criminology & Criminal Justice*, vol. 26, issue 4, 2026, pp. 1037–1052, <https://doi.org/10.1177/17488958251352854>.

Women's lived experiences of gendered violence and labour exploitation intersect with the gendered frameworks of care and intimacy that extend beyond individual homes and workplaces and across national borders. They are collective and entangled. There is a violence in efforts to disentangle these realities that are experienced as interrelated and enabling each other. Migration systems built on suspicion as well as gendered, classed, and racialised hierarchies impact how protection and support are accessed or enabled, which also interacts with labour systems that recognise some but not all the labour that care work involves. In particular, the most intimate and gendered forms of care that intersect with the everyday violence women experience at work, in public, and in the private sphere. Violence and exploitation are compounded and compounding, and they are enabled and enacted by many systems. In the context of care work and intimate labour, we can also clearly see how these structural gaps are often used and exploited by employers with impunity. This Special Issue seeks to contribute to a better understanding of these matters in order to push us further in asking how we can begin to reshape our conversations and examinations of gendered violence in all its settings.

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