We Can’t Combat Inequality Without First Valuing Care Work

Nancy Folbre – Photo: wikipedia

A feminist political economy addresses gender inequalities, but also seeks to rectify inequalities in labor division

Patriarchy and capitalism are class-based systems that serve to compound inequalities of all sorts, including gender inequality. A feminist political economy not only addresses gender inequalities, but also seeks to rectify inequalities in the division of labor. Of course, there are different branches of feminism, but a strong case can be made that a socialist feminist perspective of political economy, such as that adopted by renowned feminist economist Nancy Folbre, is best equipped to combine theory and praxis for understanding and overcoming capitalist inequalities of class, gender and race. Indeed, Folbre’s work is defined by the construction of an intersectional socialist feminist perspective.

Nancy Folbre is professor emerita of economics and director of the Program on Gender and Care Work at the Political Economy Research Institute (PERI) at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. She is the author of scores of academic articles and numerous books, including *For Love and Money: Care Provision in the U.S*. and, most recently, *The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Systems: An*

Intersectional Political Economy.

C.J. Polychroniou: I want to start this interview by asking you to elaborate a bit on the socialist feminist perspective of political economy, which you essentially helped to institutionalize, and explain how it differs from mainstream feminist political economy. Indeed, why bring socialism into feminism?

Nancy Folbre: I wish I could agree that a socialist feminist perspective has been "institutionalized." I do think it has gained some visibility, and with that, some political leverage. I am also convinced that it is gaining traction and will ultimately shape the political future.

Socialist feminism is not a newcomer to political economy. Many of its principles were laid out in the early 19th century by two Irish radicals who are often lumped in with the pre-Marxian "utopian socialists," William Thompson and Anna Wheeler. They are sometimes mentioned in history books as early advocates of women's right to vote, famous for their *Appeal of One Half of the Human Race, Women, Against the Pretensions of the Other Half, Men, to Retain Them in Political, and Thence in Civil and Domestic Slavery* in 1825. Yet they reached far beyond the issue of women's rights to insist that no economic system based primarily on individual competition could ever achieve gender equality, because tasks of child-rearing and family care require social cooperation and commitment to the well-being of future generations.

This claim lies, implicitly or explicitly, at the heart of socialist feminism. It helps explain the economic vulnerability of those who specialize in care provision in a capitalist society and the need to collectively invest in sustainable forms of development that do not prioritize profit maximization. Socialist feminists are closely aligned with ecological and climate activists in their emphasis on the need to develop more cooperative institutions. Socialist feminist political economy suggests that inequality can be a serious impediment to what might be termed (to evoke a Marxian term) "socially necessary" cooperation — or (to apply neoclassical economic jargon) "socially optimal" cooperation.

Socialist feminist political economy also suggests that capitalist societies are headed for intensified crises, not because of a falling rate of profit or a rising rate of exploitation, but because they encourage disregard for the physical and social environment in the pursuit of short-term self-interest. The degradation of human

capabilities through violence, exploitation and poverty is one example of the many forms of pollution that are fouling our nest.

Gender inequality has existed throughout human history, and U.S. capitalism clearly perpetuates gender inequality. Why is gender inequality so pervasive and how does social class figure into gender discrimination?

I wouldn't universalize gender inequality to the same extent you imply here. Yes, it is a persistent theme of recorded human history, but it has often taken different forms, linked to and crosscut by differences based on race, ethnicity and class.

The historical record suggests that some early gatherer-hunter societies were relatively nonhierarchical, egalitarian groups, even with respect to gender differences. Some such societies — such as the Hadza of Tanzania — persist today. Likewise, some societies today follow matriarchal practices — not the mirror image of patriarchal practices, but ones in which women and mothers control significant property — such as the Khasi of India.

Anthropologist Sarah Hrdy argues that the advantages of cooperative child-rearing were an important impetus to the evolution of other forms of in-group cooperation.

Sadly, patriarchal groups who sent young men into combat to claim new territory and capture young women successfully preyed on more peaceful and egalitarian groups, a dynamic intensified by the development of private property and new hierarchies based on race and class.

Gerda Lerner has argued persuasively that the institution of slavery evolved from the seizure of women. Plutarch's account of the founding of Rome fits this story, which also features in the Old Testament of the Holy Bible: Deuteronomy 21 specifies that women captured during war could be "taken as wives" after one month.

Once firmly established, patriarchal institutions proved remarkably persistent: A division of labor that disempowered women was imposed upon young people at an early age, enforced by physical force as well as religious doctrine. It is entirely possible that these exploitative institutions conferred some military and demographic advantages on the groups that adopted them, facilitating their expansion.

The emergence of class differences based on property ownership had contradictory effects on gender inequality. The two dimensions of inequality reinforced each other in some respects. By offering distinct economic privileges to women family members, while keeping them under tight sexual control, male rulers kept women divided. At the same time, their guarantees of patriarchal power offered lower-class men at least a semblance of compensation for class exploitation. One of the most memorable illustrations of this is Sir Robert Filmer's *Patriarcha* published in 1680, which explicitly based the divine right of kings on the divine right of fathers. And indeed, many fathers in that day enjoyed considerable legal and economic power over their adult children.

On the other hand, the emergence of intensified differences based on race and class weakened patriarchal institutions in some respects, putting some women and young adults in contradictory positions, where they enjoyed privileges as members of elite families and gained at least some cultural voice. John Locke wrote a scathing attack on Sir Robert Filmer, and while his liberal theories provided an ideological justification for private property and wage employment, they also undermined allegiance to the divine right of fathers.

Historically, I see a complex dialectic between class, race and nationality, and gender, age and sexuality, sometimes leading to uneven but significant weakening of patriarchal institutions. I lay out some evidence pertaining to western Europe in my book *The Rise and Decline of Patriarchal Institutions*, emphasizing the perverse consequences of colonization and slavery.

You have produced an enormous amount of work on the care economy. How do we define care work and how does it contribute to gender inequality? Moreover, what policy solutions do you propose for dealing with the problem of unpaid care work?

"Care" is a big, complicated word that can mean a lot of things, and "care work" gets defined in many different ways by different people. So let me start by saying that I propose a very broad definition — it goes beyond child care to include the care of other people, especially (but not exclusively) people who need help taking care of themselves (which is actually, most of us, at one time or another). While a lot of care work is unpaid, a fairly large number of paid jobs in health, education and social welfare also involve care provision. And care work can take different forms: Direct care typically involves face-to-face, hands-on, personal interaction.

Indirect care is less interactive, but supplies the environment in which direct care is provided, such as providing food, cleaning up messes and guaranteeing safety. Supervisory care is less an activity than a responsibility — being on call, physically and emotionally available to provide assistance if needed.

So, what makes care work distinctive? First of all, it has a distinctive "output" — the production, development and maintenance of human capabilities. The concept of capabilities, developed by Amartya Sen, Martha Nussbaum, and others, goes way beyond economists' typical use of the term "human capital," because capabilities don't necessarily "pay off" in the labor market. They encompass a range of capacities and contribute to many forms of social well-being through cooperative contributions to families, communities and the polity. Capabilities also have intrinsic value as means of self-realization and creative expression.

This definition of capabilities fits under the rubric of what is sometimes called "social reproduction" that is necessary for capitalism (or any other system) to reproduce itself over time. Yet the production of capabilities can't be reduced to the "production of labor power" because its implications reach far beyond the realm of wage employment. Direct care work is literally embodied in care recipients. Indirect care work develops and protects the opportunities for care recipients to successfully protect, exercise and expand their capabilities. Both direct and indirect care work can be interpreted as a form of investment that generates large personal and social returns.

The distinctive features of care "output" help explain why it involves a distinctive labor process that is also central to the definition of care work. Since care providers seldom have a direct claim on the value of capabilities they create — and since care recipients don't always know ahead of time what they want or need — care provision can seldom be squeezed into a process of impersonal exchange dictated by the forces of supply and demand. The quality of care provision often depends on some level of concern for the well-being of the care recipient — something biologists tend to call altruism and economists sometimes refer to as prosocial preferences.

The importance of concern for others is an obvious element of successful family and community life. Yet it is also apparent, though often in less personal forms, in the provision of paid care services. We value health care providers who care about their patients, educators who care about their students and social workers

who care about their clients precisely because if they don't care, they're not likely to do a great job — especially since they are not paid by the market value of what they produce.

The distinctive features of both its output and its labor process help explain why care work tends to be economically devalued or undervalued by a capitalist marketplace. The social benefits that it produces pay off enormously in the long run, but they are difficult to measure or to individually capture. And because commitments to provide care are deeply embedded in very gendered social norms and preferences, it is easy to take them for granted. Care workers can ask for reciprocity and respect, but it is difficult for them to threaten to withdraw their services if they aren't paid more — after all, they are, almost by definition, committed to helping others. As a result, they are often short on individual and collective bargaining power.

To resort to econo-speak, both unpaid and paid care providers are typically disadvantaged by a big gap between social contribution and private reward, especially in an economic and cultural environment in which private rewards are commonly interpreted as a measure of social contribution. In the world we live, it's not hard to hear people thinking: "You earn a lot of money? Wow, you must be really productive! You don't earn a lot of money? You must not be producing much."

The most common objection that I hear to this argument is "What about doctors? They are care workers, according to your definition, and yet they are among the most well-paid people in the country." Good point. It's important not to overgeneralize. A lot of specific personal and institutional factors influence earnings in the U.S. economy. Doctors overall have gained significant bargaining power in a very unhealthy health care system driven by a combination of market forces and bureaucratic collusion.

Still, the relative pay of different kinds of doctors illustrates my point: The most highly paid medical specialty in the U.S. is cosmetic surgery, where upscale patients are willing to pay enormous sums out-of-pocket to improve their personal appearance. The least highly paid medical specialty in the U.S. is public health, which includes prevention of infectious disease. Hardly anyone pays out of pocket for this enormous benefit, and it generates few profits of the type that investors can pocket for themselves.

So, to come back to your question about policy solutions, whether we're talking about unpaid or paid care, we need more public support for the provision of public benefits. We also need more equitable sharing of both the private and the public costs. Even a quick look at the Build Back Better legislation proposed by the Biden administration in the fall of 2022 — which would have extended public support for families *and* raised wages for child care and elder care workers — shows that at least some Democrats are trying to help out the care economy.

In contemporary social, economic and political struggles in the U.S., gender, class, race and ethnicity do not intersect often enough, and surely not with enough energy and dynamism. Is this a case of theory running ahead of praxis? How do we bring intersectionality to the fight against capitalism and patriarchy?

This is such a crucial question and top priority — linking intersectionality to political strategy. Yet my take on it is almost the opposite of yours — I think that praxis has been running ahead of theory. Most progressive activists in the U.S. are very committed to challenging many dimensions of oppression, ranging from racism to reproductive rights, sexual harassment to homophobia to exploitation in employment. However, there is a lingering tendency to put issues related to race, gender and sexuality in a box called "identity" and issues related to exploitation in employment in a box called "class."

The "identity" box highlights attitudes and language — what people say and who they side with. The "class" box highlights structural economic differences — real wages, unemployment, family income. This categorization causes problems — it pushes "identity" into furious debates about attitudes and language, and pushes "class" into something that can be reduced to economics. Instead, I think we need to acknowledge the economic consequences of group identity and the cultural construction of class.

There are two ways to put this — first, that class is an "identity" and, second, that socially assigned identities such as race or gender have very significant economic consequences (including exploitation, and not just by employers). This leads to a more complex picture of social division, one that helps explain why it is so difficult to overcome.

Let me put this in a less abstract way. As a feminist economist, I have argued, for years, that women have some common economic interests as women. Many critics

(including feminists) have retorted that women can't be categorized as an economic group because so many of them pool income with men. My response is, "Yes, but so what?" Everyone belongs to more than one economic group. Members of the U.S. working class enjoy significant benefits as citizens of the most economically powerful country in the world. (Marx and Lenin recognized the importance of the "aristocracy of labor" long ago.) Also, many members of the working class enjoy significant benefits based on their race, their gender and their level of "human capital" in the form of educational credentials. This does not imply that they lack common interests based on class.

It does imply that many people inhabit somewhat contradictory positions, making it difficult for them to assess political strategies: Wins for one of the groups they belong to can mean losses for other groups they belong to, and it is not easy to figure out the net effects. "Make America Great Again" sounds like an empty (and hypocritical) slogan to me, but it effectively signals promises to restrict free trade and immigration that are both feasible (they have been implemented successfully in the past), and tangible (less competition for me and my kids in the workplace), even if they won't really pay off in the long run.

I think this is what you are getting at when you say "struggles … do not intersect enough." Another way of putting it is that we are living through a period in which group interests don't overlap enough — that is, enough to effectively mobilize progressive change. This problem doesn't result from the theory of intersectionality; it's a real-world problem that intersectional political economy tries to explain.

Of course, this explanation can be used to justify a fatalistic, even nihilist stance. But it should be used to think creatively about the need to better explain multidimensional inequalities without simply attributing them to bad attitudes. Most importantly, it should be used to develop political coalitions around principles of economic justice that emphasize the perverse consequences of the global concentration of capitalist power, but go beyond simple prescriptions like "end capitalism."

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C.J. Polychroniou is a political scientist/political economist, author, and journalist who has taught and worked in numerous universities and research centers in

Europe and the United States. Currently, his main research interests are in U.S. politics and the political economy of the United States, European economic integration, globalization, climate change and environmental economics, and the deconstruction of neoliberalism's politico-economic project. He is a regular contributor to Truthout as well as a member of Truthout's Public Intellectual Project. He has published scores of books and over 1,000 articles which have appeared in a variety of journals, magazines, newspapers and popular news websites. Many of his publications have been translated into a multitude of different languages, including Arabic, Chinese, Croatian, Dutch, French, German, Greek, Italian, Japanese, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Turkish. His latest books are Optimism Over Despair: Noam Chomsky On Capitalism, Empire, and Social Change (2017); Climate Crisis and the Global Green New Deal: The Political Economy of Saving the Planet (with Noam Chomsky and Robert Pollin as primary authors, 2020); The Precipice: Neoliberalism, the Pandemic, and the Urgent Need for Radical Change (an anthology of interviews with Noam Chomsky, 2021); and Economics and the Left: Interviews with Progressive Economists (2021).