



From clapping for essential workers to revaluing them

Karin Astrid Siegmann

A new hero has emerged in the wake of measures to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus: the essential worker. A global crisis like the one we are facing now raises our awareness about how essential care and food are for human flourishing. The underlying logic is very simple: essential workers are [life-making](#) rather than product- or profit-making. Care and food workers therefore top the list of occupations whose work is critical to the COVID-19 response that many governments have published. Yet, while essential workers keep the cogs of societies oiled and turning, most of them remain underpaid and underappreciated.¹

Heroes of the corona crisis

Amidst collective clapping for nurses and radio spots praising the [role of domestic workers](#) for containing the coronavirus, it is easy to forget that today's essential workers were the precariat of the old normal. Around the world, care and food workers find themselves at the bottom rung of [wage](#) and social hierarchies. In Pakistan, for instance, earning the minimum wage remains a distant dream for the vast informal workforce in agriculture and domestic service. For female workers, this income poverty is aggravated by a wide gender wage gap. Female community health workers called 'Lady Health Workers' have been recognised as [key to the improvement in maternal and child health indicators in rural Pakistan](#) since the 1990s. Yet, for many years, these vital medical professionals were paid 'stipends' at half the minimum wage and not offered regular contracts like other public employees.

This pattern is not much different in a rich country like the Netherlands where I live. Here, the majority of farmworkers are migrants from Central and Eastern Europe on zero-hour contracts. Their hard work in horticulture has turned agricultural export income in the Netherlands into the world's second highest. Yet, [their employment contracts provide neither work nor income security for themselves](#). Many domestic workers who raise their Dutch employers' children and care for elderly persons are undocumented migrants whose [precarious legal](#)

[status prevents them from realising the few rights to social protection](#) that they are entitled to. The status of their work is the [tail lamp of common classifications of occupational prestige](#). Only sex workers fare worse in terms of social stigma, while [their work satisfies the human 'skin hunger'](#) that has [turned into a veritable famine in the context of corona-preventing quarantine](#).

Corona crisis aggravates essential workers' precarity

Thus, while symbolic and literal applause for essential workers reveals a level of cognisance of their importance, in fact, the coronavirus crisis even aggravates these workers' precarity.

More often than not, the additional workload for medical personnel and domestic workers to provide quality emergency care to infected persons and prevent further spread of the pandemic through cleanliness and hygiene is not balanced with overtime work compensation. Pakistan's Lady Health Workers have even seen cuts in their anyway meagre compensation. In addition, many migrant [domestic](#) and [sex workers](#) have lost their jobs, but their legal status or their occupation's stigma imply that they are not entitled to government relief packages. Migrant food workers face a [cruel choice](#) between infection at work, in cramped [transport](#) or accommodation quarters where social distancing is impossible, or the loss of their jobs and livelihoods. [Leyva del Río and Medappa](#) (2020) hit the nail on the head when concluding that: 'The 'heroes' of this crisis, those who are sustaining our lives, are barely able to sustain theirs.'

While many observers now demand a revaluation of essential work in a new, post-corona 'normal'², the examples above demonstrate that this is unlikely to be an automatic consequence of the new symbolic recognition of the importance of food and care for our wellbeing. In contrast, they flag that the ongoing crisis is likely to further erode life-sustaining activities.

How can this revaluation be achieved, then?

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² It is encouraging to witness that a diverse group of colleagues formulates and shares similar ideas (e.g. [Leyva del Río and Medappa](#) (2020), [Mezzadri](#) (2020). The ideas outlined here are also in line with and specify the demands of broader visions for sustainable post-Corona scenarios (see e.g. [Burrow](#) (2020), [Feminisms and Degrowth Alliance](#) (2020), [Group of Academics at Dutch Universities](#) (2020).

Revaluing essential work through networked struggles

Historically, higher wages, better social protection and more recognition have resulted from workers' collective struggles. Falling through the cracks of government support in rich and poor countries alike, that's what today's essential workers are doing, too. In the Colombian capital of Bogotá, for instance, the [sex worker union Sitrsexco fights poverty among colleagues](#) made jobless by Corona prevention measures by distributing food and daily necessities. In the Netherlands, organised [migrant domestic workers](#) and [sex workers](#) have set up emergency funds, called on clients to continue to support them for as long as the crisis continues, and demanded social security independent of [immigration](#) and [employment](#) status from the Dutch government. Workers in charge of cleaning the streets of Mumbai have used legal mobilisation to demand health protection at work from their employer and the government.

Allies can further strengthen such an intersectional network of essential workers. [Feminist networks](#), for instance, have supported domestic workers' and sex workers' demands alike given that the lack of recognition of these occupations is steeped in gender orders that devalue feminised work and in sexual hierarchies that stigmatise sexualities beyond the unpaid, private sphere. Migrant associations, anti-racist groups and [human rights organisations](#) have come out as migrant workers' natural allies. Migrant workers are overrepresented among all groups of essential workers as wide-spread prejudice against non-citizens, racialised people and non-sedentary lifestyles is used to justify their low wages and labour standards. The recent role of a network of allies of [migrant farmworkers in the EU](#) is a case in point. They amplify migrant farmworkers' voices in demanding 'decent accommodation, access to water, rapid testing and the provision of protective equipment for workers in European fields and processing plants' as well as paid sick leave in the short-term context of Covid-19 from EU governments. In the mid-term, they propose making EU agricultural subsidies conditional on respect for (more inclusive) labour regulations, social standards and collective labour agreements.

Given the commonality of their concerns, if networked, these struggles have huge potential to shape a post-corona future that provides essential workers with the recognition they deserve. The call to listen to and take on board essential workers' own insights in reforms towards greater labour justice and more nurturing societies is the shared starting point of many food and care workers' organisations. They typically agree that the intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, sexuality and immigration status that condition the precarity of their work and lives need to be addressed head-on in moves towards greater rights and respect. Last but not least, a choir of diverse, yet, united essential workers' voices is more likely to add volume to their demand for recognition, decent working conditions and inclusive social protection for all workers - and evoke positive public responses.

These suggestions are not some unworldly utopia, but reflect existing, encouraging practices. A few years back, I asked a Mexican domestic worker from Texas why she had travelled all the way to Ohio to join the [rally](#) of an organisation demanding justice for Florida's migrant farmworkers. Her answer was: 'They support our struggles, we support theirs.' The demand to value people over profit unites them.

These are some starting points for how the ongoing coronavirus crisis can teach our societies whose work matters most for nurturing humans. Let's not waste this opportunity.

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