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Gender-based needs and the global governmentality of care and domestic labor

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Addressing unpaid care and domestic labor is an essential gender-based need for feminist scholarship, as its unequal distribution is one of the main factors behind gender inequality. This study examines the United Nations (UN) discourse on unpaid care and domestic labor through a Foucauldian governmentality framework, analyzing policy documents since 2010. It investigates how international strategies address gender-based needs to recognize unpaid care and domestic labor and whether they contribute to transforming the gendered division of labor. Employing Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, the research assesses the rationalities, technologies and power effects embedded in UN policies. The findings reveal that the UN primarily focuses on the reduction, quantification, and economic valorization of unpaid care labor, reinforcing economic rationalities that ultimately fail to challenge the structural subordination of reproductive labor. The technocratic governance depoliticizes gender interests, prioritizing paid labor as an empowerment strategy while neglecting broader feminist demands for structural transformation. The study further argues that the feminist literature on gender needs and the political economy of reproductive labor constructs unpaid care and domestic labor as a burden, contributing to its commodification and devaluation. The right to self-determined time is discussed as an alternative framework for conceptualizing gender-based needs.

KEYWORDS

gender needs, unpaid care and domestic labor, reproductive labor, governmentality, Foucauldian Discourse Analysis, United Nations

1 Introduction

Unpaid care and domestic labor is a crucial concept in feminist theory and research which identifies the global gendered division of labor between so-called productive and reproductive labor as one of the main obstacles to gender equality (Federici, 2012). Feminist literature has accordingly framed addressing unpaid care and domestic labor and the gendered division of labor as gender-based needs (c.f. this special issue on gender-based needs). The term gender-based needs is used here as an umbrella term for women's needs and gender needs.¹ It refers to the different needs, interests and demands that stem from a specific gendered position. The interpretation of such needs is very contested (Fraser, 1987).

Unpaid care and domestic labor has gained relevance in international policymaking, such as focusing on its recognition in the Sustainable Development Goals by the United Nations

¹ Gender-based needs goes beyond the essentialist notion of women's needs and includes the rich literature on gender needs inside and outside the 'development' context (Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1989; Nawaz, 2023).

(SDG 5.4) (UN, 2015a). Feminist political economists and ‘development’² experts understand this new policy interest of international organizations in unpaid care and domestic labor as a success (Esquivel, 2016; Razavi, 2016). They have lobbied for decades for the international recognition of unpaid care and housework as a practical gender need (e.g., Molyneux, 1985; Moser, 1989). This development also contributes to the success of the concept of gender needs.

Caroline Moser, widely recognized for her gender planning framework and the concept of gender needs, aims to make unpaid reproductive and community labor visible. She wants to demonstrate that they, in fact, have “an economic value” (Moser, 1993, p. 165). Her approach of gender planning includes a “gendered cost–benefit analysis to include women’s ‘invisible work’” (Moser, 1993, p. 157). Kate Young also emphasizes such a procedure and identifies recognition, valorization, technification and modernization as three steps of gender planning, which reflects the Sustainable Development Goal of recognizing and valuing unpaid care and domestic labor (SDG 5.4) (Young, 1986, p. 18). Current international strategies to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid housework and domestic labor are thus fully aligned with the concept of gender needs. One of the central strategic gender needs or interests is the abolition of women’s subordination and the sexual division of labor (Molyneux, 1985, p. 233).

I use the recognition of unpaid care and domestic labor as gender-based needs as a starting point to ask how the United Nations governs and addresses unpaid care and domestic labor and whether it contributes to transforming the gendered division of labor. The analysis of the discourse of unpaid care and domestic labor by the UN draws on a Foucauldian governmentality framework and its feminist reformulations. The governance of unpaid care and domestic labor in the international context can be understood accordingly as a governmental technology in which international organizations inscribe governmental rationalities and apply governing techniques with their respective power effects. To research the rationalities, governing techniques and power effects, I conduct a Foucauldian Discourse Analysis of policy papers from 2010 to 2024, the most recent decades in the UN.

The paper argues that one of the power effects of the international discourse of unpaid care and domestic labor results in the devaluation of such labor by framing it as a burden and attempting to reduce such labor. Moreover, it argues that feminist knowledges in the ‘development’ context reproduce such rationalities, mainly aiming to reduce and valorize unpaid care and domestic labor. The rationalities and techniques in governing care and domestic labor, therefore, do not contribute to transforming the gendered division of labor. I further demonstrate how the formal recognition of care and domestic labor includes the rationality of economic growth and commodification, quantifies unpaid care and domestic labor, and frames such labor as a burden. Such a framing is detrimental for gender-based needs, because it deepens the gendered division of labor.

To make my argument, I first delve into the feminist literature on unpaid care and domestic labor and gender-based needs in the context of global governance and ‘development’ and show how international organizations have taken up such strategies and wording (2). The third chapter presents the theoretical framework of governmentality and governing technologies (3). It is followed by the Foucauldian Discourse Analysis as a method to trace and analyze the United Nations discourse on unpaid care and domestic labor (4). The following results show how the UN governs unpaid care and domestic labor and demonstrate the rationalities, quantification techniques, and power effects that, in fact, devalue unpaid care and domestic labor (5). Discussing the policy implications and governing effects of the formal recognition of unpaid care and domestic labor highlights the contradictions and potential pitfalls of feminist strategies and gender needs approaches and suggests alternative framings of gender-based needs (6).

2 Care and domestic labor as gender-based needs in global governance

Care and domestic labor in the context of global governance and ‘development’ has been addressed by a plethora of feminist and gender scholars and experts. In the 1990s, Caroline Moser suggested including a gender needs assessment in the preparation and design of ‘development’ projects (Moser, 1993, p. 157). The gender needs approach emerged from the concept of “basic needs” which was common in the 1970s and was established by ‘development’ policies in the Global South to meet the basic needs of the population. Those policies were succeeded in the 1980s by neoliberal economic policies and structural adjustment programs that cut back social policies and public funding (Moser, 1993, p. 35). The basic needs approach was based on the seemingly gender-neutral needs of the family and thus neglected the gendered needs of women and girls and even exacerbated the gendered division of labor (Moser, 1993, p. 40). The differentiation of practical and strategic was based on the work of the Marxist feminist Maxine Molyneux (1985), who suggested the differentiation between practical gender needs and strategic interests. Practical needs concern health care, childcare, and food, and they “are given inductively and arise from the concrete conditions of women’s positioning within the gender division of labor” (Molyneux, 1985, p. 233). Strategic interests want to abolish women’s subordination altogether and aim for the “abolition of the sexual division of labor; the alleviation of the burden of domestic labor and childcare” (ibid.). For Moser, reducing the burden of domestic labor is also an essential aspect of gender needs (Moser, 1993, 1989). She suggests in this context “the provision of adequate socialized child caring” (Moser, 1993, p. 69). Moser changed the wording of gender interests, based on a materialist understanding of gender relations, into strategic gender needs, which culminated in a plethora of feminist critiques (Kabeer, 1994; Wieringa, 1994; Puar, 1995). Gender research in the ‘development’ context also uses the term women’s needs to emphasize how development policies address the needs of women and girls and their involvement in unpaid care and domestic labor (Nhamo et al., 2018).

Unpaid care and domestic labor became part of the 2023 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the respective Sustainable

² I use the term ‘development’ in single quotation marks to underline that ‘development’ constructs a Eurocentric “vision of society based on progress and development” (Mignolo, 2009, p. 161).

Development Goals (UN, 2015d). The SDGs include a stand-alone goal of gender equality. Scholars argue that “[v]isible and specific gender equality goals contribute to strategic gender needs” (Moser and Moser, 2005, p. 18; Mikkelsen et al., 2002). Next to the needs of women and girls, the SDGs extend gender needs to the most vulnerable as part of their ‘leave no one behind’ strategy (Stuart and Woodroffe, 2016). The framework of ‘development’ goals is, in general, similar to gender assessments, which often focus on indicators and technocratic processes of their measurement and implementation (Moser and Moser, 2005, p. 18).

The SDGs were welcomed by feminist global governance scholars for the integration of unpaid care and domestic labor, but also feared that the implementation of SDG 5.4 remains a “distant dream” (Rai et al., 2019, p. 373). Valerie Esquivel (2016, 15 f) argues that SDG 5.4 includes elements of “distributive justice,” even if it is linked to women’s labor force participation and economic growth. The focus on growth is exemplified by using the GDP as a measure of ‘development’ and the focus on ‘smart economics’ instead of redistributive gender equality measures (Goldblatt and Rai, 2020, p. 189).

The feminist political economy context includes another feminist approach that focuses on unpaid care and household labor in the ‘development’ context. In 1988, Marilyn Waring argued for “a new feminist economics” by demonstrating how care and housework are systematically excluded from mainstream economic theories and international accounting practices (Waring, 1988). She traces this omission back to the missing counting of reproductive labor and campaigns for measurement and evaluation (Rai et al., 2014, p. 523). Waring (2018, p. 4) was very influential in setting the discourse on ‘counting what counts,’ a narrative she later critically reflected. Several campaigns have, however, taken up the narrative and promoted to “count women’s work” (Wages for Housework Campaign, 1990).

Feminist economics became, for a wide range of global topics, institutionalized in the area of global governance (Çağlar, 2009, 131ff.). The influence of feminist economics on international organizations is, for instance, evident in the work of feminist economists as experts and authors for the UN and ILO (Elson, 2008; Razavi, 2007; Addati et al., 2018; UN, 2000). Scholars consequently emphasize the importance of unpaid reproductive labor in the Global South and in the context of ‘development’ (e.g., Antonopoulos and Hirway, 2010; Esquivel et al., 2008). One of feminist economics’ main goals has been to reframe care and household labor as work and visualize its role in the economy (e.g., Benería, 1992; Folbre, 1995; Ironmonger, 1996; Donath, 2000). This goal has led to a focus on time use statistics and methodology to impute a monetary value to unpaid care and domestic labor by feminist economists (Razavi and Staab, 2012).

Feminist scholars and experts have also contributed to the increasing recognition of unpaid care and domestic labor as part of the UN’s broader gender equality strategy and discourse. One critical feminist intervention was, for instance, the introduction of the 3R strategy which aims to recognize, reduce, and redistribute unpaid care and domestic labor (Elson, 2017). Feminist literature on gender-based needs and unpaid care and domestic labor in global governance has, therefore, had a significant influence on UN discourses and technologies. It is concerned with how this labor is implemented in ‘development’ programs, and what kind of shortcomings it entails. Most academic endeavors revolve around the theme of ‘too little, too

late’—aiming to strengthen the importance of unpaid care and domestic labor in ‘development’ policies. The rhetoric of international regulations and policies is mostly adopted uncritically, while points of critique aim at neoliberal embeddedness, implementation strategies, or the lack of funding.³ Feminist literature has largely failed to critically analyze the discourse of unpaid care and domestic labor in global governance and to examine the power effects it produces. This paper aims to critically reflect on those linkages and the governmentality of unpaid care and domestic labor by international organizations. It draws on the theoretical framework of governmentality and their gender dimension.

3 Governmentality and gender

The governmentality framework is suitable for exploring the governance of unpaid care and domestic labor because it emphasizes the rationalities and technologies of the governing process and its relation to power. Governmentality is a reflective mode of governing targeting the population, which is tied to Michel Foucault’s genealogy of the modern state in Western societies and successively supplements juridical and disciplinary forms of government (Foucault, 2007, 2008). Foucault defines governmentality as “the conduct (conduite) of a set of individuals [...] in the exercise of sovereign power” (Foucault, 2007, p. 364). It is a rationality, as well as its execution or realization, which targets the population through a set of techniques and is based on economic reasoning (Foucault, 2007, p. 108). Global governmentality scholars have applied the concept of governmentality to IR. They accordingly “problematize the constitution, and governance of spaces above, beyond, between and across states” (Larner and Walters, 2004, p. 2). Decolonial research emphasizes, moreover, the colonial continuity and dimension of global governmentality (Kalpagam, 2014). Another important aspect is the application of governmentality to the context of ‘development,’ which identifies depoliticization and the extension of bureaucratic power as the “side effects” of ‘development’ projects (Ferguson, 2006, p. 272).

The governmentality framework is also applied to analyze indicators as governing technology, and to scrutinize its power effects (Davis et al., 2012). It highlights the increasing role of expertise and expert knowledge in global governance (Littotz-Monnet, 2017; Kunz and Prügl, 2019). Feminist scholarship brings forward how political rationalities and governing techniques are gendered, and how international gender policies, such as gender mainstreaming, are integrated into neoliberal policy frameworks and their power effects (Muehlenhoff, 2017; Sharma, 2006; Prügl, 2011; Kunz, 2011; Prügl, 2016).

International political strategies, policies, and indicators can be conceptualized as political technologies and instruments of governmentality (Larner and Walters, 2004; Dean, 2010). Researching governmentality assesses the power and knowledge effects of political strategies and their implementation (Foucault, 2003; Prügl, 2016). The focus on knowledge and political rationalities behind governing

³ One exception is the study by Bedford (2009) which is concerned with the underlying rationalities of World Bank policies.

tactics, and the process of power transformation in which the population becomes the object and subject of government is therefore an important theoretical perspective in the context of global governance and for researching international organizations (Merlingen, 2003).

A few feminist scholars conceptualize gender policies and their instruments as governing technologies. They apply governmentality to analyze and criticize the practice of gender mainstreaming (Prügl, 2011; Mukhopadhyay, 2014), gender equality policies (Gutiérrez-Rodríguez, 2010, p. 76; Repo, 2014; Beier and Çağlar, 2020), or the quantification of women's rights through indicators (Merry, 2016) as technologies of power or governing techniques. Technologies thus play a key role in governing gender and gender equality and the production of gendered power effects (Merry, 2016). Although feminist scholars identify the role of governing technologies, they have mostly failed to demonstrate how gender is governed through these techniques and instruments.⁴ Governmentality can best be traced with discourse analysis (Merlingen, 2011), which I present in the next section.

4 Materials and methods

A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis (FDA) traces the mechanisms of governmentality through identifying the political rationalities in discourses (Merlingen, 2011). A discourse is, for Foucault, “the group of statements that belong to a single system of formation,” such as the economic or the psychiatric discourse (Foucault, 2002, p. 121). Discourses are not only a social construction but also produce material power and governing effects. They are “practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak” and construct them as truth (Foucault, 2002, p. 54). “Truth” does not mean an objective truth but rather a knowledge that is scientifically, politically, or socially accepted (Foucault, 1977, 2014).

In international organizations, “truths,” knowledges, or rationalities of technologies can be examined by analyzing policy documents to identify how policy problems are constructed and what kind of strategies are legitimized to solve those problems (Merlingen, 2003, p. 367). From a feminist perspective, the governmentality framework makes it possible to analyze “the complexity of oppressive relations of power that may take on diverse forms in modern society” (Macleod and Durrheim, 2002, p. 14). Gender is constructed in the process of government and requires a “feminist analytical activism” to deconstruct gender and examine the “complexity of gender and power relations” (Lazar, 2007, 145ff). It is therefore important to focus the discourse analysis on how and under which conditions unpaid labor is identified as a policy problem, what types of knowledges emerge, which ones are silenced and disqualified, and how gender is (de)constructed in the process (Bacchi and Goodwin, 2016, p. 49, *ibid.*).

Based on these considerations, I conduct an FDA on the discourse on unpaid care and domestic labor by the United Nations because FDA “reveals the structural biases that characterize the uses of seemingly apolitical technologies” (Merlingen, 2011, p. 154). It is

therefore useful for my research, which is less concerned with the semiotic aspect of discourses but more with the rationalities and technologies of governing and their embedded relations of power (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008, 116f; Graham, 2011, p. 671). The FDA moreover helps “to gain a (re)view of the problem [FB: of unpaid labor] from the ‘outside’ and think (differently) about the present by taking up a position outside of our current regimes of truths, in order to recognize the hidden assumptions and practices that form the rules of discourse formation” (Khan and MacEachen, 2021, 6f). FDA requires selecting a corpus of statements, which “refers to samples of text that express rules for how an object is constituted” (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008, p. 118). Texts can include policy documents, such as governmental reports, websites, or press releases, that are official publications or research findings as part of an expert discourse (Arribas-Ayllon and Walkerdine, 2008, p. 115).

The UN, its agencies, such as UN Women and UNDP, and its policies from the 2010s onwards, are an appropriate unit of analysis for a discourse analysis, because the UN sets a strong normative framework for the global governing of unpaid care and domestic labor. The role of housework has been problematized from the very beginning of the UN (UN, 1947, p. 11). Still, its relevance has gained momentum after the global financial crisis, the 53rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in 2009, and the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015 (UN, 2010b, §49; Rao, 2018). The foundation of UN Women in 2010, a unified agency for gender equality and women's empowerment, contributed to the focus on unpaid care and domestic labor (UN, 2010b, §49). UN Women is moreover vocal in identifying gender needs (UN, 2014b, p. 46). The UN consists of different agencies and organizations, its member states, as well as scholars and policy advisors who publish policy documents and are an essential part of the UN. The scholars and policy advisors are therefore called the “third UN,” who “combine forces to put forward new information and ideas, push for new policies, and mobilize public opinion around UN deliberations and operations” (Weiss et al., 2009, p. 123). Those expert knowledges were also included in the research, including participatory observation during the 63rd session of the Commission on the Status of Women, which focused on social protection systems and thus also on unpaid care and domestic labor.

The discourse analysis consists of a rich data corpus, including policies, reports, handbooks, website presentations from official UN websites, and the UN Digital Library,⁵ comprising thousands of pages of text.⁶ The material was systematically coded into main categories based on the theoretical framework, which identified the rationalities (economic growth orientation and commodification), governing techniques (quantification), and power effects (devaluation of unpaid care and domestic labor) as well as subcategories. The following

⁴ One exception is the work of Prügl (2012) on the role of gender expertise as governing technology.

⁵ UN digital library: www.un-ilibrary.org. Websites: www.unwomen.org/en, <https://www.undp.org/>, <https://www.unwomen.org/en/csw/previous-sessions> (24-06-2025).

⁶ The search words were: housework, homemaking, housewife, domestic work, unpaid work, care, family responsibility, maternity, paternity, parental, time, time use, time allocation, time use survey, time-use-survey, time use study.

chapter traces the discourse in the governing of unpaid care and domestic labor by the UN since 2010.

5 The governmentality of unpaid care and domestic labor within the United Nations

Tracing the governmentality of unpaid care and domestic labor demonstrates how the formal recognition and thematization of this labor includes rationalities and governing techniques that devalue such labor or contribute to its devaluation. This section focuses on the rationalities, techniques, and power effects of the discourses on unpaid care and domestic labor by the UN. I put forward the argument that the UN contributes to the individualization and devaluation of unpaid care and domestic labor by framing it as a ‘burden’, counteracting the supposed recognition and valuation. I argue, furthermore, that feminist knowledges in the gender needs approach and in Feminist Political Economy contribute to the technical governing and quantification of unpaid care and domestic labor. The three dimensions of the governmentality of unpaid care and domestic labor within the UN include the rationalities, quantification techniques, and the respective power effects.

5.1 Rationalities for increasing efficiency and human capital

UN policy papers on unpaid care and domestic labor from 2010 onwards all include some or all aspects of the ‘Recognize, Reduce, Redistribute’ (3R) framework which was suggested and framed by the political economist and UN consultant Diane Elson at a UNDP seminar in 2009 (Elson, 2017, p. 59; UN et al., 2009; UN, 2014c, §91). The 3R narrative also inspired SDG 5.4, which aims to recognize and value unpaid care and domestic labor (UN, 2015d). Remarkably, the materialist feminist Silvia Federici (2012, 46f) proposed a similar strategy, namely the “reduction, redistribution (otherwise known as ‘sharing’), and the socialization of housework” in 1980. The UN focused its policy strategy mainly on the reduction and the recognition (and valuation) of unpaid care and domestic labor as its quantitative measurement and neglected the aspect of socialization (UN, 2017b, §55).

Under reduction, the UN understands investments in key infrastructure, such as “clean water, sanitation, energy and safe roads and transport” to “alleviate time poverty and increase the productivity of women who work from home” (UN, 2014c, §92, 2017b, §55). The reduction of unpaid care and domestic labor was also identified as a strategic gender interest (Molyneux, 1985, p. 233).

Policy papers, respectively, recommend carrying out tasks “more efficiently” and investing in infrastructure and “labour-saving technologies” (UN et al., 2009, p. 4). Infrastructure was reframed to include so-called social infrastructure, such as childcare (UN, 2009, p. 86, 2010a, p. 40). Although childcare services are mentioned, the focus lies on ‘labor-saving technologies’ and the hope, that technological progress contributes to more free time for women to engage in paid labor (ibid.).

The discourse on increasing the efficiency of housework can be traced back to the rationality of ‘home economics’ where unpaid care and domestic labor is addressed through the efficiency approach and the use of technical devices (Cowan, 1983). The increasing use of devices is favored by the UN’s private-public-partnership on ‘women’s economic empowerment’ which urges businesses to “[i]nvest in initiatives to reduce and redistribute unpaid care and work” and to “[d]esign and offer products [...] that can reduce the unpaid work and care burden women face” (UN, 2016b, pp. 9, 76). Technical solutions are thus framed as a business opportunity and a way to increase the marketization of unpaid care and domestic labor.

The presentation of technical solutions to the ‘problem’ of unpaid labor suggests that countries in the Global North are more advanced in terms of gender equality. Feminist scholars have scrutinized the illusion of ‘labor-saving’ devices and technologies and instead demonstrated that the use of these devices has not reduced the amount but rather shifted the character of unpaid housework (e.g., Cockburn and Ormrod, 1993; Vanek, 1992; Huws, 2019). Silvia Federici (2012, p. 47) calls contraceptives in this context “the only true labor saving devices.” The contestation of the labor-saving discourse has not diminished its discursive power to this day. The process of automatization not only makes it difficult to reduce this labor significantly but also contributes to the isolation of domestic laborers in their kitchens (Strohl, 1987, 296f). Although the UN and the gender needs approach include “the provision of adequate socialized child caring” (Moser, 1993, p. 69), austerity politics make the increasing commodification of domestic labor more likely (Dowling, 2021).

3R further includes the redistribution of care and unpaid labor towards the state, by providing social care services, as well as towards markets and the care economy, and towards men to equally share care responsibilities (UN, 2014c, §94, 2017b, §58, 59). The UN promotes the 3R framework as a measure to trigger “economic growth” for the “effective transformation of the care economy” (UN, 2017a, p. 9, 2017b, §57). Other strategies to target the gender division of labor, such as the general reduction of working time or the provision of communal care services, are only marginally mentioned in the 3R framework (UN et al., 2009, p. 5; UN, 2017b, §59).

More recent publications count on “digital platforms” and the “digital revolution” to provide new ways to generate income for women and to increase the balance between paid and unpaid care labor (UN, 2020a, p. 6). Services and infrastructure that reduce women’s unpaid labor are framed as smart investments not only for businesses but also for states. States are addressed as rational economic entities that can make investments to get high tax returns from women’s increasing paid labor and to generate economic growth, as the following quote demonstrates (UN, 2009, p. 24f, 2013, p. 14, 2017b, §57): “Public investment in human care has positive impacts on both GDP and job creations.” (UN, 2018b, p. 28).

This rationality was challenged by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), which criticized the “productivist bias [...] in the way caregiving is construed” and suggested a focus on the well-being of all members of the society (UN and Magaña, 2013, p. 411f). The productivist bias is, however, reproduced in the same document when economic investments in infrastructure are suggested to ‘free’ women from unpaid labor and enable them to improve their human capital in paid employment (ibid., pp. 249, 252). The idea that less unpaid care and domestic labor

leads to the economic empowerment of women is a rationality that is undisputed in the UN discourse.

The UN also links unpaid domestic and care labor to sustainability and the “green economy” (UN, 2014d, p. 2, 38ff). In 2015, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the General Assembly, which proclaimed 17 Sustainable Development Goals (UN, 2015d). The SDGs are emblematic of the further technification and quantification of gender equality. The Agenda 2030 was accompanied by feminist lobbying from NGOs, as well as actors inside the UN, for Goal 5 as a “stand-alone” goal to “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” (Gabizon, 2016, 101ff).⁷ Further engagement by feminist scholars and the UN led to the recognition of unpaid care labor under Goal 5 (UN, 2014c, §31, p. 16). The Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) emphasizes “the need to value, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work” and stresses “access to environmentally sound time- and energy-saving technologies” as one strategy to reduce domestic labor (UN, 2014a, p. 20). The notion of technological fixes to the ‘problem’ of unpaid labor was reframed to fit the sustainability rhetoric. Unpaid domestic and care labor became one sub-goal of the SDGs:

“5.4 Recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate” (UN, 2015d, p. 18).

The two notions of ‘reduction’ and ‘redistribution’ were removed, which was challenged by participating NGOs in the Women’s Major Group (Esquivel et al., 2008, p. 10). Another adjustment was the disclaimer “nationally appropriate,” framing gender inequalities as national or cultural factors. Nevertheless, feminist scholars celebrated the integration of unpaid care and domestic labor in the SDGs as a success (Esquivel, 2016, 15f; Rosche, 2016, p. 119; Stuart and Woodroffe, 2016, p. 78). Razavi (2016, 30) calls SDG 5.4 a “hard-won target” but simultaneously evaluates the loss of “reduction” and “redistribution” critically (ibid.: p. 31). Although the quantification of unpaid care and domestic labor was welcomed by feminist scholars (and UN staff), it was feared that the target would be reduced to its quantification aspect.⁸ The accompanying activities of the UN prove this fear right.

Scholars also criticize the SDG agenda for mobilizing the rhetoric of ‘leave no one behind,’ disguising that its neoliberal, colonial, and growth-based policies create the conditions that are assumed to be solved (Weber, 2017, 402ff; Wilson, 2017, 440ff). The UN already

emanates the “end of a male breadwinner model” as part of the increasing labor force participation of women, which has not increased “men’s contributions to unpaid care work,” without reflecting upon the structural and economic reasons for the global gendered division of labor and its increasing commodification (UN, 2019, p. 36).

Although the 3R framework is only partially reflected in the SDGs, the wording is still very prevalent in most UN publications since 2015 (UN, 2015b, p. 107, 2015c, p. 89, 2016a, pp. 9, 12, 2018c, p. 214). More UN publications on unpaid care and domestic labor reflect its integration into the SDGs (UN, 2015b, 2015c, 2020b; UN and Charmes, 2015; UN, 2018c, 2019, 2022b). Furthermore, various UN reports focus on the counting and valorization of unpaid labor, investments in infrastructure, and the redistribution of ‘responsibilities,’ including the changing of “traditional gender roles” (UN, 2015b, pp. 117, 120, 2015c, p. 82ff, 2021). The UN emphasizes the human and social value of unpaid care and domestic labor, but it is simultaneously seen as a “burden” (UN, 2015b, 120f). The “burden” is attributed to “cultural, family and societal constraints,” portraying the gendered division of labor as a cultural problem (UN, 2015b, pp. 117, 120, 2015c, p. 83). The narrative of cultural constraint is also inherent in the gender needs approach (Moser, 1989, p. 1813).

A different framing of unpaid care and domestic labor is evident in the topic of care for the elderly and people with disabilities in terms of demographic changes (UN, 2015c, pp. 86, 153, 2016c, 2018c, pp. 224ff). While most policies frame unpaid care and domestic labor as a “drudgery” and “burden,” the shift to elderly care also entails a discursive shift towards care needs, ‘care dependencies,’ and ‘long term care’ (LTC) (UN, 2015c, p. 86, 2018c, p. 235). The interpersonal aspect and the needs of care receivers are highlighted, reflecting the influence of the ethics of care discourse (Tronto, 1998).

In the UN discourse on unpaid care and domestic labor, the nuclear heterosexual family is set as the norm (and the female-headed family is seen as one variation). While the UN became more reflective of diverse family arrangements, including “blended families” and such that organize care in the “living apart together” model (UN, 2019, p. 45), these family arrangements are portrayed as ‘modern.’ This neglects the fact that the concept of the nuclear family is itself a Eurocentric construct that was universalized through colonialism and that a diversity of reproductive arrangements can be found in different regions of the Global South (Amadiume, 2009, p. 360). Although the UN includes a diverse range of caring arrangements in its discourse, the quantification of gender relations remains based on a binary and heterosexual conception of sex and gender.

Overall, the rationalities of unpaid care and domestic labor by the UN aim to reduce these activities to get more women into paid employment and “reap the ‘double dividend’ in terms of women’s economic empowerment,” which demonstrates the economic reasoning behind the focus on gender-based needs (UN, 2015c, p. 178). Different narratives, including ‘sustainable development,’ poverty reduction, economic ‘empowerment,’ population control, and gender equality, are thus part of a capitalist growth-based rationality of unpaid care and domestic labor within the UN (UN, 2016d, p. 4, 2015b, 2015c). The UN’s focus on ‘time-saving technologies’ and the so-called reconciliation between paid and unpaid forms of labor has increased economic reasoning and the idea of efficiency-based human capital investments instead of focusing on care needs or needs of carers.

⁷ The feminist success was, however, limited, since goal number five is the only goal without any time-bound targets and therefore solicits lesser commitment. More importantly, the question of additional resources for implementing strategies remains unaddressed and stands in stark contrast to the ambitious goal of gender equality. The further financing and implementation strategies of the SDGs were operationalized by donor states in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda 2015 and neglected structural inequalities (Stuart and Woodroffe, 2016, p. 77; UN, 2015a).

⁸ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/stories/2017/5/take-five-shahra-razavi-families> (31-03-2025).

5.2 Time use surveys as quantification techniques

A critical dimension of the UN discourse on unpaid care and domestic labor is its measurement by time use surveys to account for the economic ‘value’ of such labor. Such an initiative is part of a greater rationality of quantification within the UN. In 2016, UN Women launched the project ‘Making Every Women and Girl Count’ as a private-public partnership with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the national governments of Australia, Ireland, Mexico, the USA, and the UK (UN, 2018a, pp. 6, 9).⁹ The project aims “to help support countries in their efforts to inform policies and monitor the implementation of the gender equality-related [SDGs] and other national policy priorities” (UN, 2018a, pp. 6, 9). One outcome of the project is the website ‘Women count’, which presents gender-related data and resources, such as publications and toolkits for the production and collection of gender data.¹⁰ The website leaves the impression that data collection, rather than gender equality, is the ultimate goal. By highlighting that “it will take 22 years to close SDG gender data gaps,” the collection of gender data is framed as progress and as part of a linear ‘development’ process.¹¹ UN Women refers to ‘Women Count’ as “UN Women strategy for change,” defining the quantification of gender-related topics as one of its strategic aims.¹² The UN furthermore proclaims a ‘gender data revolution’ including ‘quantifying care’ (UN, 2018c, p. 59, 2021):

“Solutions for better gender statistics need to be part of the data revolution. Data that accurately reflect the challenges faced by women in their daily lives, including in undervalued areas such as time spent on caring for family members, are woefully inadequate.” (UN, 2018c, p. 59).

In 2014, a UN committee understood recognition as “the imposition [...] of a state obligation to guarantee an equal distribution of care [...] as a fully-fledged economic and social right” (UN, 2014c, §92). Such knowledge was, however, lost in the process of further quantification. The acquisition of more and better data was directly linked to the formulation of better policies and thus the ‘empowerment’ of women.

The allocation of resources to collect ‘better data’ has become one of the global strategies to achieve gender equality which means that fewer resources are available for other programs. The ‘gender data revolution’ propagates that better data translates into better (informed by quantitative data) policies and ultimately leads to women’s ‘empowerment’ and gender equality. Data on unpaid care and domestic labor became no longer just a way to include such labor into economic satellite accounts and to valorize it but became the ultimate goal of the UN instead.

Since 2010, the UN has introduced and refined new ways of quantifying care and domestic labor and portraying the data. More accurate time use data became a priority of the ‘gender data revolution’.

Collecting more data is also an incremental part of Moser’s (1993, p. 94) gender needs assessment and feminist political economists’ aim to valorize reproductive labor (Esquivel et al., 2008).

However, such data often remains a technical instrument without bringing about any societal transformation. Power effects, moreover, permeate quantification processes. The quantification of time by time use surveys was strongly influenced by ‘new household economics’ and human capital calculations about the economic value of child rearing, education and housework (Becker, 1965). They measure time use individually, thus transporting rationalities of efficiency and implying the ‘rational choice’ of domestic laborers. Because they only measure time use individually, they do not account for care needs, the availability of public childcare services, or nursery homes. Instead of analyzing or reflecting on societal and economic reasons, the analyses of time use surveys thus hold individuals responsible for how they spend their time and suggest individual ‘solutions’.

Quantifying unpaid care and housework is also at the interface of other quantification endeavors. The UN argues for reducing unpaid care and domestic labor to govern fertility rates because lower fertility rates would “free up women’s time, enabling greater participation in the labour force” (UN, 2015b, p. 109, 2015c, p. 76, 2019).

Quantification is thus a governing technique, in which the quantification of unpaid care and domestic labor increasingly replaces economic and social policies. Time use surveys, moreover, include liberal and neoliberal rationalities of efficiency and self-determination that depoliticize the gendered division of labor. Power effects of quantification can thus lead to the devaluation of unpaid care and domestic labor.

5.3 Devaluing care and domestic labor as power effect

One of the power effects of the rationalities and quantification techniques of unpaid care and household labor, is the notion that women in the Global South “spend too many hours on domestic work” (UN, 2010a, p. 47). Such assumptions normalize how much time is appropriate for care and housework and set time use in the Global North as a global standard. The normalization of time use can be seen as a direct effect of its quantification. It is also inherent in the notion of ‘time poverty’, which defines the ‘normal’ distribution of time in contrast to “excessive hours” in paid and unpaid labor, curtailing women’s “opportunities for education and paid employment” (UN, 2011, p. 105, 2020b, p. 37). UNDP also focuses on ‘time poverty’ and suggests energy investments and “electric household appliances” as solutions (UN, 2022c, p. 26). Time poverty and the waste of time through household tasks are primarily constructed for women in the Global South, identifying cooking, catching water, or collecting firewood as too time-consuming (UN, 2010a, p. 47):

“Access at the household level to water, sanitation, electricity and clean cooking fuels can have a direct impact on women’s time and the drudgery of their labour, by reducing the need for water and fuel collection and by enabling the use of timesaving electrical appliances.” (UN, 2020b, p. 86).

The report ‘Turning promises into action: Gender equality in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ suggests that women who

⁹ <https://press.un.org/en/2016/sgsm18111.doc.htm> (31-03-2025).

¹⁰ <https://data.unwomen.org/> (03-04-2025).

¹¹ <https://data.unwomen.org/features/it-will-take-22-years-close-sdg-gender-data-gaps> (03-04-2025).

¹² <https://data.unwomen.org/> (03-04-2025).

perform more unpaid labor are poorer and worse off than women who perform less (UN, 2018c, p. 223). Inequalities and diverse living situations are considered without changing the narrative that less unpaid labor is automatically better. People who earn less and spend more time in unpaid activities could, for instance, have a higher living standard due to subsistence labor, better food supply, and more autonomy over their labor, as well as positive societal connotations of being a caregiver and/or a farmer (Chung et al., 2019, p. 1558f).

Activities such as gathering firewood or catching water or fuel, are framed as a waste of time by the UN. Such activities are, however, often performed collectively and are thus an opportunity to socialize with others: “In this sense, some women appear to perceive fuel collection as an opportunity for social interaction, personal pleasure and home care as much as a chore” (Simon et al., 2021, p. 303). Because the idea of housework is based on Eurocentric knowledge about an isolated middle-class housewife, such collective forms of task sharing do not occur in the UN discourse on unpaid care and domestic labor. The UN equates dependency and care relationships with women’s subordination in the Global South (Plumwood, 1993, p. 443). Eradicating collective and social forms of reproductive labor and propagating technological automatization instead leads to the individualization and domestication of such labor. Shared water wells are one example demonstrating such a venue’s social function (Gerrad, 2022, p. 87). The wording ‘domestic’ labor is also based on Eurocentric knowledge, which neglects that much of the so-called ‘housework’ is performed in public and can have social functions (Oakley, 1974, p. 55; Simon et al., 2021, p. 293). By neglecting the social function of reproductive labor, its societal value is negated.

The fact that reproductive labor does not necessarily equal dependency shows the role of food production and processing that can enable at least partial independence and autonomy from capitalist production cycles, as well as patriarchal power, by allowing some food autonomy (Sørensen, 1996, p. 621ff; Bennholdt-Thomsen and Mies, 2000, p. 9). The negative connotation of unpaid labor is associated with the devaluation of the subsistence economy that has been enforced through the ‘development’ discourse (Rauna, 2011, p. 218). The UNDP proposes for instance to “[r]aise the productivity of unpaid care work by reducing the arduousness and inefficiency of care tasks [and to] prioritize the promotion of investments in time and labor-saving technologies that are focused on domestic work” for ‘developing countries’ (UN et al., 2009). Paid labor is framed as the ultimate solution to gender inequality which, however, “reduce[s] women’s traditional control of production and its products” (Bulbeck, 1998, p. 35). The rationality of manual housework as a burden universalizes Eurocentric experiences of middle-class women and tries to “fix” women in the Global South who are portrayed as victims who assumingly spend “too much” time with unpaid activities (UN, 2022a, p. 11; Oyèwùmí, 2016, p. 214). One effect is the neglect of “inequalities between and among different groups of women care-givers” by framing unpaid care and domestic labor “as a source of tension between women and men” (Chung et al., 2019, p. 1551).

Another power effect of the discourse on unpaid care and domestic labor is its commodification. Commodification is a common way to reduce and externalize unpaid care and domestic labor (Dowling, 2016, p. 460). Commodification is intensified through state-led marketization strategies aiming to reduce or ‘value’ unpaid labor (Yamane, 2021, p. 50). The commodification of domestic and care activities has further contributed to precarious working

conditions in the care sector and the low-wage employment of feminized and racialized domestic workers (Yamane, 2021, 54ff; Marchetti et al., 2021). By commodifying domestic activities, they are, in fact, devalued, while intersectional inequalities are increased. The reduction of unpaid care and domestic labor and its framing as a burden, therefore, systematically devalues such labor. Such framing was already in place in the gender needs approach by Molyneux and Moser in the 1980s and 1990s, although the technification of gender planning and the governing of unpaid care and domestic labor by the UN have further contributed to its devaluation by quantification.

Not only the United Nations but also feminist literature on gender needs or feminist political economy put forward the main rationality of unpaid care and domestic labor as a ‘burden’. This contributes to its devaluation because it should be overcome or reduced instead of valued and recognized (Moser, 1993, pp. 49, 53; Molyneux, 1985, p. 233; Mezzadri et al., 2022, p. 1788). The narrative of unpaid care and domestic labor as a ‘burden’ reflects Eurocentric liberal as well as Marxist feminist knowledges (Kollontai, 1977, p. 94; Federici, 1975, p. 3; Friedan, 1974). Black, intersectional, and decolonial feminisms have instead decentered the notion of unpaid care labor as a burden and emphasized its empowering aspects instead (Collins, 2000, p. 46; Oyèwùmí, 2016, p. 216). Studies on agricultural and subsistence activities in the Global South demonstrate that these activities are also connected with “positive emotions of joy, satisfaction, and fulfillment” (Chung et al., 2019, p. 1558). Not only care but also subsistence labor can, therefore, be associated with positive feelings. The negative normative value of unpaid care and domestic labor is one power effect of the UN’s claim to ‘recognize’ or ‘value’ this labor.

6 Discussion

Unpaid care and domestic labor plays a unique role in feminist thought because the gendered, racialized, and classed division of labor forms the basis of socioeconomic inequalities. It was thus identified by feminist scholarship as an urgent gender-based need to be addressed. UN policies purport to ‘recognize’ and ‘value’ unpaid care and domestic labor. Using the governmentality framework, my study highlights the rationalities, governing techniques and power effects of the United Nations’ discourse on unpaid care and domestic labor. I have demonstrated that this discourse does not question or counteract the division of labor but focuses on the ‘integration’ of women into the paid labor force. It therefore reinforces the devaluation of unpaid care and domestic labor by its connotation as unproductive or a waste of time. The main aims of feminist knowledges to abolish the gendered division of labor are thus subverted in the ‘development’ practice and its economic rationalities and quantification technologies, but also inherent in the conceptualization of unpaid care and domestic labor in feminist concepts and strategies, such as the gender needs framework.

The governmentality approach also has its limits, as it prescribes certain power effects and thus neglects agency in the process of being governed (Deveaux, 1994). The quantification of unpaid care and domestic labor is, for instance, a double-edged sword, which on the one hand obscures normative values of care, but on the other hand increases the visibility of and valorizes the quantitative amount of unpaid care and domestic labor. Reducing unpaid care and domestic

labor towards more paid labor can also increase economic autonomy and can be one important precondition to end violent relationships. Although the quantification and reduction of unpaid care and domestic labor can thus be an efficacious feminist strategy for the valorization of such labor and more gender equality, it does not contribute to its valuation or to the abolition of the gendered division of labor.

This study is limited by the fact that international organizations prescribe certain forms of knowledges and governing technologies. Whether national states consistently implement them accordingly is left unclear in this discourse analysis. Focusing on implementation practices and the kind of resistances and deviations that occur during their implementation is thus an important area for further research. Further research could, for instance, investigate how the SDGs are implemented on the national or local level and how the implementation transforms rationalities and techniques. Moreover, it would be important to explore the differences between the Global North and the Global South in handling international policy prescriptions. Concerning the gender-based needs approach, it would also be essential to know how the concept is referred to on the national or local level or which alternative concepts are used to identify gender policy areas.

Tracing the rationalities, technologies and power effects of the UN discourse on unpaid care and domestic labor has also highlighted how feminist knowledges are at least partially part of this discourse. Such a result makes it necessary to not only consider domestic and care labor as a burden but also reflect on its emancipatory, resistant, and joyful potential as Black feminist, queer, and decolonial knowledges suggest.

Framing gender-based needs differently could, for instance, concentrate on the aspect of time and argue for an increase in self-determined time. More self-determined time for paid and unpaid domestic workers and gender time justice would thematize and oppose the increased workload in unpaid and paid labor or time constraints regarding the triple role of women and queers. Multiple responsibilities contribute to the increase of gender inequalities, but moreover to time inequalities for feminized carers and domestic workers (Bryson, 2007, 2016). The solution to time justice is, however, not the reduction of domestic labor, which can contribute to more paid work and its commodification, and thus an increase of precarious feminized and racialized paid domestic labor. Time justice and the inherent right to self-determined time is a more appropriate gender need as it does not demand shifting the time spent in care and domestic or subsistence labor towards more paid, usually precarious, labor. Such an approach makes a feminist politics of time necessary, which acknowledges the differing temporalities of care and aims for a more equal and just distribution of time along the axes of gender, race and class (Bryson, 2007; Beier, 2025).

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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