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Title of the paper: Thinking with care and care work in women-owned home-based enterprises in South Africa

Author (s): Hannah Acutt

Affiliation: University of Pretoria

Email correspondent author: hmacutt@gmail.com

Abstract (150 words):

The exploration of the importance of care work has been an important development in feminist economics. Care in the social sciences, however, has evolved as an ontological position that does not idealise care, but rather supports depicting the whole messy realities of allowing ourselves to be affected by others in our interdependent existences (van Dooren, 2014). This essay will discuss the concept of care as care work and as a theoretical framework in relation to fieldwork I conducted on the digitalisation of women-owned home-based enterprises. In this fieldwork, I paid attention to the webs of connection that the HBE owners cultivated and were involved in and how they worked as a part of these webs and with other actors to make digitalisation and its meanings. I will therefore grapple with the topics of social reproduction, entanglement, and flexibility in the Global South in relation to emerging discussions on the importance of care in a feminist approach.

Paper (2000 words without references)

The exploration of the importance of care work has been an important development in feminist economics, as it brings to light the invisible labour involved in our social reproduction. Care in the social sciences, however, has evolved as an ontological position that does not idealise care, but rather supports depicting the whole messy realities of allowing ourselves to be affected by others in our interdependent existences (van Dooren, 2014). As such, I will discuss the concept of care as care work and as a useful theoretical framework in relation to fieldwork I conducted in 2020 on the digitalisation of women-owned home-based enterprises (HBE). In this fieldwork, I paid attention to the webs of connection that the HBE owners cultivated and were involved in and how they worked as a part of these webs and with other actors to make digitalisation and its meanings. I will therefore grapple with the topics of social reproduction, entanglement, and flexibility in the Global South in relation to emerging discussions on the importance of care in a feminist approach.

In 2020, I conducted fieldwork for my Honours research project. I chose to research how women-owned home-based enterprise (HBE) owners in South Africa digitalised their payment methods during the Covid-19 pandemic and how it was in their encounters with other actors like the government, courier companies, and the payment gateways that they made digitalisation. I interviewed five HBE owners using an extended case method approach, interviewed two officials from the Payments Association of South Africa (PASA), interviewed the National Sales and Marketing Director for GlobeFlight, and employed participant observation by registering a business myself and interacting with the actors' online presences by visiting their websites. Putting my focus on female HBE owners allowed me to take a gendered approach and analyse how the home, the traditional space of women, is reworked in this context. Briefly, the HBE owners that I interviewed are as follows; their information was correct at the time of interviewing. First is Susan<sup>1</sup>, a 25-year-old unmarried woman living in Vereeniging, Gauteng, who started selling nail supplies online in 2016. Second is Rochelle, whose business sells natural and hand-dyed yarns and accessories for knitting, crochet, weaving, and spinning. She was 46 and lived with her husband and two teenagers in Kloof; before she had her children, she worked as a Market Researcher. Similarly, Liezel used to work as a Recruitment Consultant in the IT industry, but eventually joined her friend's business in 2017 (which she later bought) to be able to manage her own time with her two small children. Her business's flagship product is homemade baby goods. Next is Megan, a 33-year-old

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<sup>1</sup> The names of the home-based enterprise owners have been changed for the purposes of privacy.

woman living with her husband and two children. Her business sells clothing specifically for tall women. Last is Jane, who started her business of selling luxury sleepwear as a means to eventually have more flexibility in her working life, as she was dissatisfied with her job. The uncertainty caused by the pandemic, however, later caused her to close her business, as she stated, “In the Covid times, that security of a job is, like, priceless.”

There is a long history of literature that deals with home-based enterprises. In capitalist economies following the Industrial Revolution, the home came to be seen as the domestic space of the family, separate from work and labour in factories (Tipple, 1993). HBEs, however, display an “interrelationship between housing and income-generating activities” (Tipple, 1993, p.521), which complicates the neat binary between the home and work of capitalism. The literature on HBEs describes how entrepreneurs, usually in developing countries, make use of their typically small dwellings to produce something for sale to their local area (Strassman, 1987). In South Africa, HBEs have been found to be “an important income-generating strategy and play a key role in poverty alleviation at the household level” (Gough et al., 2003, p.264). Accounts of these enterprises depict them as entities that present women with a way to blur the boundaries between work and home and to combine their reproductive and economic roles in the household. My argument diverges from this account in two crucial ways. First, I suggest that previous depictions of HBEs do not allow for processes of change, transformation, or any greater webs than those within their homes (Desmond, 2014). Instead, for my research, I was interested in bringing into relief the greater webs that the women are involved in creating, as thinking with care necessarily creates relation (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012). Thus, their labour extended further into the world than simply their own home economies. Second, while these entities may offer women the opportunity to engage in income-generating strategies, the implicit suggestion by the previous literature that it is still the women’s responsibility to also juggle reproductive labour, or care work, could reveal that these enterprises still contribute to a propagation of gendered inequalities.

Using the concept of a non-idealised care to make sense of and explore women’s labour in the Global South is useful for exploring the ways in which these women contribute to the network of capitalism and digitalisation. Such an approach is therefore well-suited to a feminist economics for the emphasis it puts on all forms of labour – be it material, emotional, or mental – that go into constructing our networks of relation. Rather than treating ‘the economic’ as a bounded domain, as “economies are vital, living, humanmade” (Nelson, 2006, p.4), capitalism

can be understood as being “formed through the relational performance of productive powers that exceed formal economic models, practices, boundaries, and market devices” (Bear et al., 2015b). It is in these everyday actions of individuals and their encounters with the world around them that inequalities and unequal power relations are propagated (Bear et al., 2015a). It is, therefore, in the everyday actions of the HBE owners that they contribute to the networks of capitalism and digitalisation, rather than these systems being imposed down on them in a uniform way. Furthermore, the HBE owners did not always distinguish between 'work' and 'home' tasks in the traditional understanding of this dichotomy. Instead, they entangled these tasks in ways that reworked these boundaries.

The HBE owners were therefore actively involved in shaping the meanings of digitalisation, incorporating these systems into their lives in ways that suited them. One of the ways in which they contributed to these meanings was in their discussions of boundaries. Susan explained to me that “it’s not where, okay, 7 to 5 you’re at work and then you go home and you’ve got your life at home; it’s all mixed up in one bundle.” She did not have ‘working hours’ or ‘home hours’, but packed orders and updated the website whenever she got the time. Typically, she worked at the dining room table and did not have a separate working space. In this way, her home became a space that housed many different kinds of tasks, entangling ‘work’ and ‘home’ tasks together.

Rochelle had a similar muddling of boundaries, and it was the idea of this muddling that drew her to becoming an HBE owner in the first place. Like many of the other owners, she wanted to be able to both work and look after her children, and it is generally understood that HBEs allow women to combine reproductive and economic responsibilities (Gough et al., 2003). This combination of responsibilities, however, also meant that Rochelle struggled to put boundaries between herself and the business, as her workshop and stock were in her home where she could always see them, and she told me during one interview that “it doesn’t help that [knitting is] also [her] hobby”. Both Rochelle and Susan attributed the possibility of this entangling of boundaries to their use of payment gateways, as they could do everything that they needed online without going anywhere. Liezel furthermore explained that being digitalised helped her to multitask more easily, or juggle her home and work responsibilities. In her previous work as a Recruitment Consultant, she felt that “there was just no time; everything was very rushed...there was no balance”. Now, however, “there’s no working hours; so it’s a good thing, but it’s also a bad thing because you never switch off.” In making digitalisation something that

gave her flexibility, the immediacy involved in this creation also meant that her work was always within easy reach. Like Rochelle and her knitting, making digitalisation in this way created a constant entanglement of work and household life. Such entanglement therefore shows that, for these women, 'the economic' was not a separate domain, but one that was intimately involved with their home lives in ways that they constructed.

Thinking with care and in the world (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012) additionally allows me to bring together the issues of addressing interdependent threads of reality where the threads are not always equal or smooth – some threads might be thicker and more powerful, others might experience friction and fraying. By creating relation in my depiction of the HBE owners, I am caring about the different threads that make up their lives. However, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2012) explains, caring is not a smooth or harmonious process, as the practicalities of interdependent existence are fraught with troubles. The flexibility to rework boundaries that the HBE owners' encounters with the payment gateways afforded was the owners' main commendation. Liezel stated that she thought “[digitalisation] gives a lot more flexibility for everyone, and being able to fit in with your work life, your balance, your routine, your schedule.” Similarly, Jane was initially drawn to the idea of an HBE for the flexibility it provided in comparison to her job as a school administrator. As Natile (2020, p. 43) suggests, however, this framing of female entrepreneurial activity is problematic, as it “assum[es] the elasticity of [women's] labour, time and 'natural' capacity for providing for their families and communities”. Thinking with care is thus helpful in this context, as it involves acknowledging the occasionally disharmonious nature of care and that caring can involve “labours that are often associated with exploitation and domination” (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012, p.198). Most of the women took up the role of HBE owner in response to the growing pressures of childcare and family responsibilities, finding that their corporate working environments did not accommodate these growing pressures. When Megan's first child was born, she went back into office administration, which she had previously left because of “restlessness”. She found the return to this job frustrating because, being in a male-oriented working environment, “there wasn't really an atmosphere of understanding [about family]; it was almost like women must just get over it”. After becoming grossly dissatisfied with her working environment and feeling like her children were suffering from her long working hours, she quit her job. Furthermore, Liezel explained that being able to structure her work day as it suited her was appealing because “if the kids get sick, I don't have to ask anyone ‘Can I take them to the doctor, can I have the day off; they're sick, they need to stay home’”. In order to cope with this care work, they felt

it necessary to leave working environments that did not allow for the ‘elasticity’ of their time and labour for spaces that ‘naturally’ did – the home.

Approaching care as both an ontological position and as a type of labour therefore allowed me to trace the varying ways in which the HBE owners constructed their home and working lives. In thinking with care and cultivating relation, the ways in which the women were actively involved in shaping the meanings of digitalisation emerged – for them, flexibility and reworking boundaries. However, as caring also implies paying attention to the disharmonies of a harsher reality (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2012), this flexibility can be understood as an elasticity of women’s time that must necessarily make room for care work. Thus, by tracing the webs and threads of relation that the women have with the world around them – payment platforms, family members, couriers – the complexities of their labour can emerge.

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