

## Transcript

### OU Economics seminar series: essential for what?

#### Introduction and Sara Stevano

##### Susan Newman:

I'm very pleased to welcome you all to this OU economic seminar series. This is the final seminar of this year's series. And I'm Susan Newman. I'm the head of economics here, and I'm really pleased to be chairing today's event where we'll be discussing the concept of essential work. It's a particularly close topic to me, and I've worked both with Sara and our two speakers here in different ways. So, I'm really delighted to have these two distinguished speakers.

##### Sara Stevano:

The gist of what I would like to say in this presentation is that the notion of essential work does have a transformative potential. But to mobilise that transformative potential, it is essential to reach far beyond the boundaries of academia. And hopefully, this is just one of the first spaces where we do so. So, in my presentation today, I will draw on a paper that was published last year in the Canadian Journal of Development Studies, so part of a special issue on the COVID-19 pandemic. And this paper, which was entitled Essential for What? as a question. And this is also what gives the title to this webinar today. It was co-authored with Rosiemina Ali and Merle Jamieson. So, I very much would like to acknowledge their work on this paper, because it was very much a collective effort. So, before I tell you a little bit more about the paper itself, I want to share with you what the main argument that I would like to put forward is. And then I will just say a couple of words on what it means to take a social reproduction lens. And then I will share the key findings of the paper itself, and I will conclude with some emerging questions.

So, the main argument that I would like to make is the following. So clearly, there is a gap or even a tension between a feminist understanding of essential work, which in a broad sense is work that is needed in order to make life rather than profit and how many governments across the world have used the notion of essential work, particularly during the first year of the pandemic.

So, for me, if we start from this perspective that there is such a gap or even a tension, there are at least a couple of questions that become quite salient at the moment. The first is whether it is desirable to reclaim the meanings of essential worker from a feminist perspective.

But then there is also another question, which is whether it's possible to do so, in particular with an aim to realign the social and economic value of work. And this is because I think one of the key lessons that we've learned from COVID is that clearly in our economies and societies, the social and economic value of work is certainly not well aligned.

So, in terms of the desirability of doing this, my answer is in the affirmative. So, I would say that it is certainly desirable to try to reclaim the meanings of essential work. And perhaps a bit later I want to say something as to why this is not-- I mean, this looks like an obvious answer, but probably, it's not.

And in terms of the possibility to do so, I think that this is fundamentally a more political question. And whether it is possible or not depends on the ability of feminist movements across the board to foreground these demands. And for feminist movements to take a very prominent role in shaping economies and societies in the post-neoliberal world if you want or in the post-COVID world. So having shared this main argument with you. I would like to explain what it means from my perspective to take a social reproduction approach to the question of not only essential work, and not only work in general, but also to think about the functioning of the economy more broadly.

So very often in economics and political economy, as many people here will know, there is a focus on market activity or production. And to take a social reproduction lens means to essentially turn this on its head. And instead of starting with production, starting with what is needed in order for production to take place.

But the key issue here is that taking a social reproduction lens does not only mean not to look at social reproduction rather than production, but to understand the articulation between production and social reproduction, which indeed are not two separate domains. But to use the terminology or the phrasing by Cindi Katz so they are mutually constituted and in tension contemporary capitalism. So, on the one hand, we have capitalist production. And on the other hand, we have social reproduction by which many social reproduction feminists including myself understand social reproduction in a very broad way in that it encompasses all of the work, unpaid and paid and also the material social practices that are needed to reproduce a human life and also to reproduce a socially differentiated labour force, which in other words means to reproduce capitalist relations in a society. And so, what is I think at the core of taking a social reproduction lens is to analyse how labour is allocated and divided across production and social reproduction and also how it is valued or in fact often devalued. And that is particularly the case for social reproduction worker. And indeed, this ranking in terms of value is at the root of the perpetuation of structural inequalities, which indeed were magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic.

And from our perspective, the designation of workers as essential or nonessential during the COVID-19 pandemic was a very important dimension of the reorganization of work during the pandemic where in fact, the COVID-19 pandemic itself I think needs to be understood as being fundamentally a crisis of work where we understand work in a feminist sense as including both productive and reproductive work.

So, moving to the motivations of our paper, Essential for what? The reason so why we started working on the notion of essential work around probably April 2020 was that it was very evident from the very beginning that what was being called essential work at that point, a lot of it, not all of it, but a lot of it was also what feminists would call social reproduction work.

And it was also evident from the very beginning that essential workers are predominantly working-class Black and Brown people, women, and migrants. And so, governments engaged in this massive rebranding operation, if you want, where there was a sudden shift from the use of labels and categories to refer to work as low skill and low productivity jobs for example. And they replaced this labels with essential work labels.

So, from my perspective at least, and probably not only because many feminists have talked about that at the beginning of the pandemic, it was quite a significant shift. And therefore, we were

interested in trying to understand whether the notion of essential work had any potential or offered any potential to re-valorise a social reproduction work.

And so, we set out to address two key questions. The first is, what is essential work? And how have the classifications of essential work been used by governments in the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic? So, between January 2020 and June 2020. And the second question was, how can the uses of essential work classifications be assessed from a feminist or social reproduction perspective. So, what we did was we compare the essential work classifications used in seven different countries. These countries were Brazil, Canada, England, India, Italy, Mozambique, and South Africa. And then we developed an assessment of such uses, zooming in with specific illustrations from Mozambique, which is a country that both Rosiemina Ali, my co-author and myself have been working on for a number of years.

So, our findings. I'm going to present our findings in two blocks. So, the first part of our findings is very much based on analysing that the categories of essential work used in these seven different countries. And we were actually quite surprised to find out that there were indeed some common categories across the seven countries.

But the common categories were only 13 out of 53 total categories that we found across these countries. So that meant that there were clearly many differences in terms of what was considered to be essential work across the countries that we looked at.

And for me at least, so this was surprising because when governments started talking about essential work, there was something that I felt was quite intuitive about the notion of essential work or the fact that some forms of work had to continue while others could either work from home or stop performing their work or during the pandemic.

But in fact, what these classifications told us was quite a different story, right, where how countries are defined what constituted essential work or not was actually quite different. So just to give you some examples. England did not list cleaners explicitly as essential workers. While Brazil and Mozambique did not list carers as essential workers. Another example shows that some countries qualified quite specifically what constituted an essential good.

And this is what for example, South Africa did, while others left it probably intentionally quite ambiguous. And this is what happened in England, for example, which had very significant implications for what the companies like Amazon, for example, could do. And in many contexts, it was clear that what ended up being on those lists of what was essential work was the outcome of very intense negotiations between the government, the employers, and the trade unions.

And these were certainly the case in Italy, where in fact, those lists were updated a number of times reflecting the balance of power across these three main actors. So clearly, this suggests that there is no intuitive universal meaning of what essential work is. But in fact, the ways in which governments have used this concept was revealed as a very political and fungible character of essential work. And so, if we are to address the big question, essential for what? It is clear that the way that governments used that concept was not only about protecting health and ensuring the reproduction of human life to some extent. But it was also to protect some parts of capitalist production and capital accumulation. And in a way this reflects also the nature of social reproduction in a capitalist society. But indeed, it is a fundamental tension that I think we need to bear in mind when we think about how we can reclaim the notion of essential worker from a feminist perspective. Now, the second set of

findings are about revealing some critical omissions or partial integrations in those classifications of essential work. And we identify three of such omissions or partial integrations in our paper.

The first is that the one type of essential work that was clearly missing from all these lists was unpaid care work. And that was revealed by the fact that the importance of care relations across households were largely neglected through the stay-at-home policies that required everybody to stay at home. But also, the expectation that paid work could continue regardless of the increased reproductive work taking place in households reveals that clearly unpaid care work was not considered to be essential by any government.

The second omission or partial integration in this case is that of informal work. So, this, of course, depends on context, but it went from a cases where informal workers were essentially excluded from essential work classifications to contexts in which they were somehow included, but then having been designated as essential workers did not bear any material consequences for them. So, it was rather inconsequential.

And the third critical omission is that has to do with the work integrated in transnational dynamics. And so, this is primarily the case of supply chain workers in the global South, so those workers at the origins of global supply chains. But also, migrant workers in many countries across the world for whom-- exactly, so having been designated as essential worker or not or did not have much of an implication in terms of their ability to continue to perform their work, for example.

Because I can tell you, for example in Mozambique, many workers who work in agri food chain whereby the classification set out by the Mozambican government consider to be essential. But of course, if their work in Mozambique was connected with a global supply chain that was disrupted in other places of the chain, then that meant that many of these workers could not work in the same way during the COVID-19 pandemic.

And so, these omissions or partial integrations reveal what we called a productivist Western and nationalist bias, which is embedded in the notions of essential work as used by governments during the first phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. And so, I think it's very clear why I started this presentation by saying that there is clearly a gap or even a tension between a feminist's understanding of essential worker and how governments use these notions.

Now, if I were to write that paper today, I would probably place some more emphasis on the double-edged nature of essential work. And I'll explain what I mean in a second. But I think that when we wrote the paper, we thought that broadly speaking, being classified as an essential worker was mostly a positive thing. And this is because some essential-- I mean, because many essential workers, not all of them, were able to keep their job and income, which is, I think, a positive thing.

But of course, what our paper highlighted was that not all essential workers were able to do that because of the tribal bias that I've just described. But also, what I think became very clear later on is that many essential workers were also much more exposed to the disease. And so now we have very clear epidemiological evidence that shows that excess mortality or COVID mortality was much higher among essential workers.

And in particular, some categories of essential workers such as health care workers, taxi drivers, and farm workers. And this is drawing on some studies from the UK and the US. But also, the

concentration in essential occupations was one important determinant of racial and ethnic disparities in COVID mortality in the US, for example.

To this I would also add that being classified as essential worker in some cases heightened the disposability of these workers, for example, through schemes that were put in place to recruit essential workers on demand as it has been described for farm workers, for example, transferred from countries in Eastern Europe to the UK or Germany in order to perform agricultural work when needed without ensuring that work could take place in safe and healthy conditions. And I think that this is important to think about the complex nature of essential work in the context of the pandemic.

But so, coming to the conclusion. What is the overall assessment of the notion of essential work, and how the classifications have been used during the COVID-19 pandemic? So, the key message is that essential worker classifications have I think forced a global recognition of the social value of workers who are normally considered to be low skilled and low value workers.

But there are certain important mutations that we need to be very aware of. First, unless the biases that I have described that were embedded in the definitions of essential work are overcome, the most vulnerable workers will be cut out of any potential process of re-valorisation of essential work.

Second, so far, there is no evidence, any systematic evidence let's say, that any material gains or gain was made by essential workers. So, in other words, the misalignment between social and economic value of work continues to be not addressed. And in fact, I think it is currently being exacerbated in the context of the global living crisis that we are living through. And finally, there is possibly an emerging consensus that essential work designations have increased disposability of many essential workers.

I would like to conclude however with a second set of buts, which points to why I started by saying that I think it is desirable to try to reclaim the meaning of a social work, and it might as well be possible. First, there is some anecdotal evidence of this at least some categories of workers in specific contexts acquired visibility during the pandemic by virtue of having been classified as essential.

And that gave them more bargaining power, for example, vis-a-vis the state. And that was the case of informal food street vendors in South Africa, and this is evidence that has been collected by an organization called WIEGO doing a lot of work on the informal economy across the world. Second, I do believe that the transformative potential of the concept is not entirely lost. And this is because indeed the shift from low skill work to essential work is a very significant one. And there is something to that we should hold on to I think. And finally, I think the feminist movements are can shift the political terrain by foregrounding their own understanding of essential work and prioritizing demands for the socialization and re-valorisation of essential work.

So, on this note, hoping that I haven't taken too much time, I end my presentation. And I very much look forward to learning more about the art exhibition and what Michal has to say. Thank you.