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The French care economy: between gendered inequality and feminist idealism

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ABSTRACT

The care economy in France is a site of both profound gendered inequalities and of renewed feminist idealism for an alternative social model and feminist ethic. This paper focuses on the realities of work in the elderly care sector at a moment of deepening crisis, with deteriorating conditions for both carers and the cared for. The Orpea scandal exposed how multinational corporations exploit care work for financial profit, with devastating consequences for a largely feminised and racialised workforce. Drawing on insights from ethical feminist theory, investigative journalism and documentary film, the paper explores the possibilities and limitations of the feminist ideal of a new radical politics of care. The paper draws on the documentary film *Debout les femmes!* as a lens with which to test the potential of the ethical feminist goal of a politicisation of care. We will see that while ethical feminists celebrate care's transformative potential, social change to improve labour conditions is impeded by a political establishment that maintains gender inequalities in the interests of economic expediency. The paper shows how maintaining a low-cost and devalued workforce is profitable by enabling the economy to free-ride on care activities, while denying them monetary and social recognition.

RÉSUMÉ

L'économie des soins en France est un lieu de profondes inégalités entre les sexes et d'un renouveau de l'idéalisme féministe en faveur d'un modèle social alternatif et d'une éthique féministe. Cet article se concentre sur les réalités du travail dans le secteur des soins aux personnes âgées à un moment où la crise s'aggrave et où les conditions se détériorent à la fois pour les soignants et les soignés. Le scandale Orpea a révélé la manière dont les multinationales exploitent le travail de soins à des fins de profit financier, avec des conséquences dévastatrices pour une main-d'œuvre largement féminisée et racialisée. S'inspirant de la théorie féministe éthique, du journalisme d'investigation et du cinéma documentaire, l'article explore les possibilités et les limites de l'idéal féministe d'une nouvelle politique radicale des soins. L'article s'appuie sur le film documentaire *Debout les femmes !* pour tester le potentiel de l'objectif féministe éthique d'une politisation des soins. Nous

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verrons que si les féministes éthiques célèbrent le potentiel de transformation des soins, le changement social visant à améliorer les conditions de travail est entravé par un establishment politique qui maintient les inégalités entre les sexes dans l'intérêt de l'opportunisme économique. L'article montre comment le maintien d'une main-d'œuvre bon marché et dévalorisée est rentable en permettant à l'économie de profiter gratuitement des activités de soins, tout en leur refusant une reconnaissance monétaire et sociale.

Introduction

France, like many other countries, has faced a deepening crisis in care services for the elderly in the context of a rapidly ageing population, chronic underfunding by the state, privatisation and a largely undervalued and exploited work force (Chambaud 2023). Writing over half a century ago, Simone de Beauvoir argued that the systemic mistreatment and marginalisation of the elderly within modern societies constituted a failure of civilisation (De Beauvoir 1970). The contemporary care crisis continues to raise questions that lie at the heart of France's republican social model: what are the state's obligations to those who are too old or vulnerable to engage in productive work? How is the burden of caring for the vulnerable shared across society? How should those who undertake care work be recognised and remunerated? This crisis was transformed into a national scandal following the publication of Victor Castanet's *Les Fossoyeurs* in 2022, which drew on an in-depth investigation into the world-leading care home provider Orpea and exposed at France's most luxurious and expensive care home facility, conditions of appalling mistreatment, abuse and neglect (Castanet 2022). Critically, this book also shone a spotlight on the situation of care workers who, while tending to the immediate physical and emotional needs of elderly residents, are habitually denied basic rights, such as the minimum wage, regulated hours and an employment contract. Care work is characterised by deep-seated structural inequalities along gender, racial and social lines. Despite the French state's commitment to abstract equality, its venerated Labour Code and the lip service paid to essential workers during the pandemic, carers continue to be denied the most elementary of employment rights.

Care has been the focus of intense interest from French feminist scholars across wide-ranging disciplines, sparking a renewal of feminist critique and a 're-arming' of feminism in response to the challenges of the contemporary neoliberal order (Ibos 2019, 188). Feminist ethical scholarship is characterised by both a critique of labour inequalities in the care sector and a celebration of care as a potential model of social transformation and an alternative feminist ethic. On the one hand, ethical feminists provide a trenchant critique of care work, exposing overlapping forms of marginalisation rooted in gender, ethnicity and social class. They aim to bring the harsh realities of care work to the surface, describing it as 'le sale boulot': a pre-condition for the economy to function, yet devalued, marginalised and exploited (Molinier 2020, 38). On the other hand, feminist scholars idealise care as a repository for alternative humanist and positivist values that could resolve the myriad social ills of contemporary neo-liberalism. They argue that since care

sustains, undergirds and reproduces social and economic relations, it is a source of immense power and possibility for social change. They point to the transformative potential of a new radical politics of care (Le Goff 2013; Segal 2023). A key goal of ethical feminism is a politicisation of care that would position it at the centre of social and political life and draw on its intrinsic humanist values to construct an alternative social model. The purpose of this paper is to consider the possibilities and limitations of care as a model of social transformation that could resolve the social and economic tensions of neo-liberalism.

We will see that social change to transform carers' rights is impeded by the economic and political structures in which care work is embedded. The paper draws on the documentary film *Debout les femmes!* and the political campaign that it represents in order to elucidate some of the impediments to transformation within the care sector. This film might be seen to enact the key goal of ethical feminists to 'politiser le care', by pushing it from the margins to the centre of political life, asserting the rights of carers, and demanding improved labour conditions (Damamme, Ibos, and Makridou 2022, 11). Yet, we will see that the French government, despite a commitment to abstract equality, still refuses to recognise care as real 'work' that is entitled to the same status, rights and protection as other forms of productive activity. Such a refusal enables the economy to continue to benefit from activities of care-giving, that while essential for any economic activity to take place, are accorded little monetary value and are treated as if they are free: 'free-riding on the life-world' (Fraser 2016). While the film might be seen to document a political failure, it also vindicates a powerful feminist argument: that carers' subordinate status is not a consequence of biological determinism or natural evolution, but an outcome of deliberate political decisions that deny equal rights to the feminised workforce in the interests of economic expediency.

Feminist care ethics

There has been considerable interest amongst feminist scholars across wide-ranging disciplines in the care economy both as a site of gendered and structural inequalities and as a potential model for social and political transformation (Molinier, Paperman, and Laugier 2021; Molinier 2020; Ibos et al. 2022). In France, this scholarship has coalesced into a distinctive field of research, an 'école française du care' that has been shaped by earlier waves of feminist critique and, in particular, the legacy of materialist feminism of the 1970s (Ibos et al. 2022, 14). Indeed, care ethics has given rise to a renewal of feminism by generating new critiques of the economic order, signalling unequal power relationships and positing an alternative vision of society. Recent scholarship extends many of the earlier analyses of the domestic sphere and the status of unpaid female labour in the home to the situation of waged female labour in the economy. Along with earlier feminists, scholars argue that care work is characterised by a gendered division of labour or a 'division sexuelle du travail' that relies on naturalised feminine attributes of nurturing, cleaning and sustaining others (Kergoat 2001). Because these skills are deemed to be intrinsically feminine, they are not recognised as productive activity and are devalued economically and socially. Like the materialist feminists, recent scholars argue that care labour is externalised by the economic order and pushed out of the realm of the productive economy. While caring provides the (non-economic) conditions of possibility

for capitalism to function, by producing new generations of workers and sustaining those who are too ill or old to work, it is devalued by the very system that relies on it (Fraser 2016). Along with earlier feminists, recent scholars seek to lay bare the structural inequalities and harsh social realities of care work.

While care ethics has been influenced by a legacy of French materialism, its theoretical and philosophical foundations originate in the work of US feminist theorists such as Carol Gilligan and Joan Tronto who, shaped by a humanist philosophical tradition, developed new ethical theories of care during the 1980s and 1990s (Gilligan 1982; Tronto 1993, 2015). American ethical feminists argued that all human beings are defined by an essential ontological insecurity: we are all vulnerable, dependent and rely on others to sustain and nurture us. Since vulnerability and precariousness are universally shared, caring should be regarded as the primordial activity of any society. For these scholars, values of human interconnectedness, reciprocity and compassion which define care work could provide an alternative to mainstream liberal ethics and help resolve the core economic and social ills of our time. Indeed, caring roles that are traditionally associated with women could provide an alternative feminine paradigm for public and political life, one that places precedence on the value of producing and maintaining social bonds. Drawing on US ethical theory, French scholars see care ethics as a broad-based critique of contemporary society and a perspective for reshaping economic thinking; they describe this as ‘une manière de voir la vie ordinaire, le social et le politique à partir d’une prise de conscience de notre vulnérabilité en tant qu’être humain, de l’importance de nos interdépendances et de nos attachements’ (Ibos et al. 2022, 11). For French feminist ethicists, the notion of care therefore provides a political theory, an ethics and a political praxis that orientates people to new ways of living, relating and governing and seeks more just relations of power and greater economic equality (Beasley and Papadelos 2024; Woody Brown, and Marin et al. 2021).

What distinguishes French care scholarship in relation to its US counterpart is its strongly collaborative and cross-disciplinary nature, a concern with labour conditions and an intersectional perspective that takes account of overlapping forms of oppression. While the leading US theorists tended to work within separate disciplines and independently of one another, French care scholarship emerged as a collective research initiative that is often located in a volume edited by sociologist Patricia Paperman and philosopher Sandra Laugier, which brought together feminist scholars from wide-ranging disciplines (Paperman and Laugier 2005). In this volume, French feminists explicitly chose the English term ‘care’ as a concept grounded in everyday life and social relationships over the more narrow and medicalised French term ‘soin’ to describe their research. French care scholarship is also characterised by a preoccupation with concrete working conditions over more abstract political and ethical theory and a focus on intersectional forms of marginalisation (Molinier 2020).

French ethical feminist scholarship is marked by a juxtaposition between a critique of care work and its structural inequalities, as well as a reification of care as an alternative societal model. Many care scholars are concerned with exposing the material, embodied and lived experiences of care workers through in-depth ethnographic analysis, examining what care work means for those who actually do it. For instance, Pascale Molinier carried out a detailed study of a care home for the elderly and describes work that is extremely

demanding, demeaning and repetitive, consisting of tasks relegated to women, the low-paid and migrants, work that others in society do not want to do (Molinier 2020). She seeks to give voice and recognition to women's lived experiences and aims to contribute to a struggle against exploitation, oppression and marginalisation. Similarly, in her comparative study of careworkers in France, Japan and Brazil, Helena Hirata draws on wide-ranging interviews to document the racial discrimination experienced by care workers who come predominantly from migrant backgrounds (Hirata 2021).¹ Meanwhile, Natacha Borgeaud-Garciandía examines Peruvian live-in care workers in Argentina showing how migratory processes reinforce the social invisibility of care labour and its occlusion from monetised forms of recognition and valorisation (Borgeaud-Garciandía 2023).

While this scholarship foregrounds economic and structural inequalities, it is also underpinned by a moral positivism that celebrates care as a radical social alternative. Carol Gilligan drew a key distinction between a feminine care ethics and a feminist care ethics. While the former equates moral goodness with self-sacrifice, the latter sees all human lives as interconnected and interdependent within a wider social, political and moral network of relationships (Gilligan 1982). For French scholars, care provides a philosophical space for an alternative order of values that gives precedence to principles of compassion, interconnectedness and reciprocity and seeks to elevate these to a model for society as a whole: 'ce qui fait la valeur du travail de *care* est la valeur de vie' (Molinier 2020, 175). Care provides a means to rethink the contemporary social order and crystallise responses to diverse social ills, from rampant neo-liberalism, to racism, violence and social inequality.

French ethical feminists' shared goal is a politicisation of care that would place the political once again at the centre of feminist critique and assert the 'centralité politique du travail des femmes et du care' (Hirata 2021, 183). For instance, Pascale Molinier sets out the framework for a 'société de care', defined as 'le projet concret d'une transformation des pratiques sociales et politiques' (Molinier 2020, 184–185). From a position of structural inequality, care work could provide the basis of a 'vulnérabilité constitutive' and a means to rethink the nature of the social and economic order itself (Molinier, Paperman, and Laugier 2021, 29). Similarly, for Hirata, the path to emancipation lies in profound structural transformation of the social order: 'Le procès d'émancipation passe par une conscience de genre, de classe, de race, et par un procès de lutte contre l'exploitation, l'oppression et la domination' (Hirata 2021, 187). However, ethical feminists tend to eschew the materialist perspective of earlier second-wave feminists who had conceptualised gender in terms of social and economic arrangements and, instead, they posit a more idealistic and abstract vision of social change. For Molinier, we need fundamentally to rethink the basis of care relations by extricating them from existing hierarchies and value systems. Since the economic order devalues care as unproductive and non-economic work, we should reject a narrowly economic or materialist perspective:

Il faut néanmoins faire le pari de penser le travail en dehors de l'économie, en dehors de sa valeur marchandise, en dépit des difficultés et des objections que la suspension de l'économique comme critère décisif dans la définition du travail ne peut qu'engendrer. (Molinier 2020, 62)

While earlier materialist feminists situated women's subordination within a system of structured economic relations and sought historical change through a transformation of

those relations, ethical feminists seek a fundamental reconceptualisation of human activity that elevates care to an ideal that operates outside of economic structures.

Ethical feminism has attracted criticism from a range of scholars who have pointed to what they see as its moral abstraction, theoretical vagueness or essentialism. For instance, Claudine Tiercelin criticises the ‘ever-growing ranks of care evangelists’ who perceive themselves as radical but in fact occupy the intellectual mainstream and whose arguments are based on ‘a heap of simplifications and well-worn platitudes’ (Tiercelin 2022, 1, V). Others have criticised the essentialism of care ethics and a tendency to romanticise motherhood or attribute intrinsic ethical qualities to women alone (Jenkins 2020). Still others have accused care scholars of providing a kind of ‘slave morality’ that valorises the oppression of women and affirms subservient traits as values (Tomkins 2021). These critiques highlight some of the shortcomings of feminist ethics as a project for social or political transformation. On the one hand, ethical feminists tend to extricate care from the economic system and power relationships that determine its conditions and status and present it as a theoretical ideal. In repudiating economic forms of valorisation in favour of moral ethics, it, however, weakens opportunities to challenge the economic system in which care is embedded: ‘care theories allow politics to be subsumed by morality’ (Michaud cited by Tiercelin 2022, XIV). On the other hand, by celebrating care as an alternative feminine ethic for society as a whole, they risk perpetuating and reinforcing existing structural inequalities. For ethical feminists, care seems to be the promise of a utopian society of the future rather than a concrete project of social transformation that might improve the material conditions of care workers in the present.

‘Les Bords de Seine’

France, like other Western industrial societies, has been gripped by a deepening ‘care crisis’ triggered by chronic underfunding, an ageing population, privatisation and deteriorating working conditions. The impact of the pandemic exacerbated this crisis by exposing, on the one hand, the intrinsic value of care work to society as a whole and, on the other, the appalling conditions and social recognition afforded to the carers who provide this work (Chambaud 2023). In France, the care crisis was transformed into a national scandal following the publication of *Les Fossoyeurs* (2022) by the investigative journalist Victor Castanet, which drew on a three-year investigation into the French private equity group Orpea, the leading global provider of care homes, which owned 356 homes in France alone. His investigation centred on the company’s showcase facilities at ‘Les Bords de Seine’ in Neuilly, Paris’s wealthiest suburb, where residents pay exorbitant fees on the promise of luxurious ‘hotel-like’ facilities and personalised care. His book draws on 250 interviews with family members, carers, nurses, aides and former managers at the facility, whose testimonies expose the immense human toll that lies behind the company’s profiteering. He reveals how a care home system driven by an overarching imperative to generate shareholder profits resulted in a systematic mistreatment of elderly and vulnerable residents. While Orpea turned some of its managers into millionaires, its success was achieved through a ruthless cost-cutting logic achieved through a rationing of food and medical supplies and generalised medical negligence. This juxtaposition between the external façade and hidden realities of the care system is expressed most starkly when the author describes organised visits to the care home,

where wealthy families are welcomed into a plush lobby adorned with objets d'art, and where they are offered champagne before visiting the indoor swimming pool and gym in what appears to be a 'paradis des personnes âgées' (Castanet 2022, 14). We are then brought to the fourth floor where some residents, deemed too unsightly for public view, are locked in their rooms and often left to sit for hours in their own excrement and denied basic care. A campaign led by family members exposed systematic negligence, a preponderance of short-term untrained staff, mistreatment and malnutrition. Following its publication, the care sector became the focus of heated political and media controversy and the CEO of Orpea was summoned by the French government to account for these allegations and was subsequently forced to resign. This was followed in June 2023 by a judicial investigation into three Orpea senior executives who were accused of breach of trust, fraud, aggravated misuse of corporate assets, organised money laundering and private corruption (Reuters 2023).²

While focused on the treatment of elderly patients, Castanet's book also exposes working conditions within the care sector, where the drive to reduce costs results in insecure contracts, low pay, long hours, chronic understaffing, lack of training and dangerous working conditions. Orpea's profits were derived directly from a misappropriation of public funds, whereby executives pocketed state funding destined to pay the salaries of care staff, and by falsifying employment records to show that they employed more staff than they did. Soaring profits were contingent on driving down working conditions, as the company reduced staff numbers to a bare minimum and pushed carers to take on impossible workloads. Drawing on interviews with care staff, Castanet describes how on occasions, one or two carers would be left overnight looking after 124 residents with complex medical and physiological needs. Staff were often employed without legal contracts or employment protection and were not trained in how to lift or move residents correctly. Some carers describe their distress at having to deliver inadequate nutrition or hygiene supplies to those they are looking after. In one interview, former nurse Laurent Garcia, dismissed for speaking out against poor conditions, describes how he found an elderly resident alone and naked in a shower, where he had been abandoned by an over-stretched carer who was coping with an unmanageable number of residents at the time. For Castanet, the physical demands and psychological strain on carers of this systematic negligence leaves traces on the body and mind and breaks the human spirit: 'Ces conditions de travail, avec le temps, laissent des traces. Votre peau s'épaissit, votre humeur se dégrade, votre rire n'a plus la même résonance. Vous avez perdu, sans vous en apercevoir, de votre légèreté' (Castanet 2022, 22). Prior to the book's publication, Castanet was pressured by the company and was allegedly offered 15 million euros not to publish it.³ Describing the public and moral scandal that erupted following the book's publication, one reviewer observed: 'Ce n'est plus un livre, c'est une bombe' (Castanet 2022).

This book shines a light on the profound structural inequalities affecting care work. A 2022 INSEE study on gendered inequalities in the labour market shows that 90% of care workers ('aides-soignants') are women as are 95% of domestic workers ('aides à domicile et aides ménagères'). This compares, for instance, with only 46% of women employed as office managers ('cadres de bureau') (Briard 2022). Similarly, the report on care work ('métiers du lien') submitted to the National Assembly that features in the documentary *Debout les femmes!* attributes the poor conditions and precarious status of care work

specifically to its historical status as gendered labour. Because domestic work was historically carried out by women for free, it is naturalised and still not accorded the status of equal and valued work. As a result, the majority of carers still earn poverty wages for providing physically and emotionally demanding work in what the report describes as 'vies de galères, salaires de misères' (Bonnell, Ruffin 2020, 9). Gender inequalities intersect with racial and social inequalities, and France, like other European countries, increasingly relies on inexpensive and flexible migrant female labour for care work. Recent studies show that domestic work is the sector that employs the highest proportion of migrant workers in France (Desjonquères et al. 2021). Recent changes in the economy linked to privatisation and financialisation have accentuated these inequalities by increasing the reliance on low cost and socially disadvantaged workers (Pimpakrared 2024).

Feminist scholars tend to situate the subordinate status of care in a process of externalisation that pushes care outside of the productive economic sphere and relegates it to the private domestic realm. Some feminists locate care work within 'boundary struggles' that separate the productive and reproductive economy, masculine from feminine and the private from the public sphere (Fraser 2016). However, recent scholarship tends to overlook the ways in which a changing neoliberal economy and, in particular, the rise of financialisation has fundamentally altered these dynamics. France, like other countries, has undergone a progressive privatisation of the care home sector over the past two decades and a 1997 law, which opened up public finances to the care sector, has enabled private investors to access state funds to pay for many of the costs of care including staffing.⁴ While the French government still retains a large state presence in the care sector, approximately 25% of care homes are now run as private for-profit operations owned by companies such as Orpea (ENCO 2021). The extension of financial and corporate control over the care sector by private equity firms, hedge funds and real estate investment trusts has transformed the relationship between care labour and the mainstream economic sphere. Care is no longer excluded from the economy as an unprofitable activity or as 'a backward residue, an obstacle to advancement that must be sloughed off, one way or another', but is increasingly integrated into mainstream economic structures as a source of financial expropriation (Fraser 2016). Such changing dynamics have tended to blur the divisions identified by feminists between productive and unproductive and between the public and private sphere.

Recent studies show how financialisation has precipitated a sharp decline in working conditions in the care sector with an exponential rise in insecure contracts, longer working hours, understaffing, frequent sick absences, lower pay and poorer material conditions (Nirello 2021). Private corporations have been able to take advantage of the historical devaluation of care as unproductive and low-status work with weak bargaining power (Farris, Horton, and Lloyd 2024). Yet financialisation has also intensified this devaluation, as profits are predicated on driving down labour costs and standards. Methods of leveraged buyout or 'pump and dump', whereby care homes are acquired by multinational corporations through bank loans, mean that the care homes are then required to drastically reduce their costs, so that they can be sold on at a profit in a short period of three to five years. Financialisation has generated an opposition between two contradictory dynamics: caring for the elderly based on non-productive, labour-intensive and intimate human engagement and financial profit-making based on cutting costs,

generating efficiencies and extracting monetary value. It is crucial for ethical feminists to engage with the changing economic dynamics that determine the subordinate status of care labour in the contemporary financialised economy if they are to recover the radical potential of their critique. This requires moving beyond a binary conceptualisation separating the productive and unproductive and recognising care labour's position at the centre of a financialised economy that both intensifies historical subordination and generates new forms of exploitation.

Debout les femmes!

A core goal shared by ethical feminists is a politicisation of care that would push it from the margins into the centre of political life and posit it as a model for radical societal transformation. We have seen that ethical feminists share an idealistic vision of care that tends to extricate it from an economic framework deemed to devalue care work and present it instead as an alternative political imaginary. The documentary film *Debout les femmes!* provides a useful lens with which to think through the limitations and possibilities of this feminist goal of politicisation (Perret and Ruffin 2021). Awarded a César for best documentary film in 2022, the film documents a political campaign to give voice to carers, highlight their exploitative working conditions, assert their fundamental value for society and demand political change. The film follows two elected representatives from opposite sides of the political spectrum, François Ruffin (La France insoumise) and Bruno Bonnell (La République en marche) who form an unlikely partnership in a campaign to draft a bill on care workers' rights (Proposition de loi 'Reconnaissance des métiers du lien') and present it before the vote in the National Assembly. As part of their mission to investigate the realities of care work through the lived experiences of carers themselves, the film provides an in-depth exposé of care work in twenty-first-century France. Drawing on insights from the ethics of care, this section analyses the film from the perspective of the following question: to what extent can the care sector provide a site for radical political transformation and thereby fulfil the ethical feminist goal of politicising care?

Debout les femmes! is distinctive in portraying the care sector from a social realist perspective that places material labour conditions at its centre, presenting this as an urgent matter of social justice that concerns society as a whole. The film can be situated alongside other recent examples of innovative documentary production on care work, such as Vincent Jarousseau's *Les Femmes du lien*, which documents the lives of female essential workers in *bande dessinée* format and includes scenes from the latter film (Jarousseau 2022). The film continues Perret's film-making concerns with the lived social realities of work and renews a collaboration with Ruffin that began with the film *J'veux du soleil* (2019) that focused on the 'gilets jaunes' protestors. *Debout les femmes!* contrasts with other recent documentaries that tend to portray care work through an idealistic lens, often representing it as an exemplary mode of human or emotional engagement.⁵ In recent films, carers are often depicted as virtuous, self-sacrificing and exemplary individuals who possess a spiritual understanding of the human condition as they accompany their elderly charges on the journey from life to death. For instance, *La Vie des gens* (Ducray 2014) follows the routines of home care nurse Françoise as she travels around the streets of Paris on her scooter visiting elderly patients at all hours of day and night, and the film plays on her tireless dedication to her patients. If Françoise is an exceptional

nurse, it is that alongside physical care, she has a profound understanding of what it means to face the end of one's life and the experiences of isolation, fear and vulnerability that this engenders. Similarly, *Prendre soin* (Hagenmüller 2018) follows four caregivers in their everyday work routines in three care homes where they care for elderly patients, many with Alzheimers. While the film makes the undervalued and intangible work of caregivers visible (Evrard 2022), this is projected as an emotional rather than a material or socially defined labour relationship. For instance, while it is evident that the carers we see are overwhelmingly women from ethnic minorities, this is not acknowledged in the film. The role of the carer in both of these films is represented primarily as a mode of 'emotional labour' in which intimate and subjective human resources are intrinsic to the labour exchange (Peat and Ridge 2023). The material realities of long hours, low wages and exploitative contracts are, however, eclipsed behind a portrayal of care as an idealised human connection.

Debout les femmes! brings to the surface the lived realities of care work by following carers on their daily work routines as they visit their elderly charges and talk about their experiences. For instance, we follow Martine, a care worker on a visit to an elderly woman. As she helps the woman to dress, she describes how she is required to rush from one client to the next in short 20-minute slots. We learn that her working day starts at 8.30am, finishes at 9pm and continues for six days a week. When asked about her payslip, she tells us that she earns a meagre salary of 867 euros a month, of which 465 goes on her rent. The film engages with the emotional dimension of care work, as each of the women interviewed expresses their love for the job and the sense of fulfilment that it brings. Yet, eschewing an idealistic lens, the focus is on the unjust treatment of these women who perform work that is essential to society, yet who lack basic rights and protections. Many carers struggle to fulfil their own basic needs and have difficulties paying their bills and providing for their families. In various meetings, Ruffin presents care work as a mode of gendered inequality that is devalued because women throughout history have been responsible for caring for children, the sick and elderly and are expected in a contemporary context to perform these tasks without recognition or remuneration. Indeed, the preamble to his parliamentary bill frames carers' rights as a feminist issue:

L'heure est venue de 'reconnaître et rémunérer' tous ces métiers du lien, métiers très largement féminins, et sans doute maltraités pour cette raison: parce qu'ils sont occupés par des femmes, parce que, durant des siècles, au foyer, les femmes se sont occupées des enfants des malades des personnes âgées, et bénévolement, gratuitement. Aujourd'hui, on les paie, mal, mais on les paie: de quoi se plaindraient-elles? (Bonnell and Ruffin 2020)

The film shines a spotlight on the failure of the political establishment to fulfil its own democratic ideals of fair and equal work and to extend representation to all sections of society. Hence, the film is interspersed with extracts from television speeches by Emmanuel Macron where he cites the 1789 Declaration of Rights and calls for better recognition and remuneration of essential workers. We see Macron's speech during the Covid crisis where he extols the exemplary sacrifice of essential workers who continued working throughout the pandemic, and yet remain mistreated and overlooked: 'Il nous faudra nous rappeler que notre pays tient tout entier sur des femmes et des hommes que nos économies reconnaissent et rémunèrent si mal' (Perret and Ruffin 2021). This rhetoric is contrasted with the harsh realities of carers' working lives and with the incontrovertible

fact that they are excluded from the most basic social rights and recognition. This contradiction is encapsulated by the film's opening scene, where we see a black female cleaner at the National Assembly dusting a bronze bust representing a historical figure and then pushing her cleaning trolley along the marble floors and opulent interior that characterises this seat of political power. When she is later interviewed, we discover that she gets up at 4am every day and despite working as a cleaner at the National Assembly for 25 years, she is still earning only the minimum wage. Her quotidian proximity to an institution that embodies the nation's democratic ideals reinforces the failure of these institutions to extend rights to its most marginalised citizens.

The film centres on an enquiry carried out by Ruffin and Bonnell into the status and conditions experienced by carers within French society at the request of the National Assembly's Commission of Economic Affairs. Hence, they undertake a succession of meetings with trade unions, employers, local politicians and carers themselves. Ruffin also accompanies a number of carers on their home visits, observing their work and speaking to them and their charges. This mission culminates in a draft bill on carers' rights that seeks to extend basic employment rights to the feminised workforce of carers, cleaners and teaching assistants. The bill does not call for special status for carers, but rather for them to share the basic rights of all workers as defined in the Labour Code. Hence it calls for all carers to be paid at the minimum wage through a nationally defined salary framework and for them to be paid for all the hours that they work, including overtime and travel to clients. It calls for carers to have access to secure and permanent contracts (CDI) and to have access to training to improve their skills and opportunities. In recognition of the emotional challenges of their work, it stipulates that carers should not lose pay when attending the funeral of one of their charges (Bonnell and Ruffin 2020). However, when Ruffin presents the bill to the National Assembly, each of the proposals is massively defeated in the parliamentary vote. Not even the Socialists or Greens are prepared to support better working conditions for carers. These women are left high and dry by the French state: no minimum wage, no limit on working hours, no recognition. The film is a story of political failure and the refusal of the French establishment to recognise care as equal work deserving of elementary rights. This refusal entrenches carers in a marginalised position on the sidelines of the economy as an exploited, undervalued and invisible workforce.

If the film highlights the failure of formal politics, it also culminates in the symbolic and moral triumph of these women, as they organise themselves into an *assemblée des femmes* by occupying a central room in the National Assembly in the film's closing scene. In a context in which they are disenfranchised and excluded from centres of power, the women's assembly is a powerful symbolic moment in which they assume the authority to articulate their own narratives. They each take it in turns to speak about their experiences on the microphone and some are reduced to tears when they describe the precarious nature of their lives and their struggle to survive. The audience is confronted with lived experiences of suffering, exhaustion, impoverishment and injustice. One woman who works as a carer for disabled children recounts how she cannot afford to support her own two children and has been forced to sell her home. Another describes how she was obliged to quit her studies when she was aged 20 because of the demands of her carer job and that 10 years later she is still on temporary contracts renewed every two months, and cannot afford to start a family. The film closes when all the women

gathered in the assembly sing *L'Hymne des femmes* (written by feminists within the Mouvement de Libération des femmes in March 1971), that is a rallying cry for solidarity and for resistance to oppression: 'Levons-nous femmes esclaves/Et brisons nos entraves/ Debout, debout, debout!' This situates their struggle squarely within a broader historical feminist struggle for dignity, rights and recognition. However, while the film empowers and gives voice to women, some have criticised what they see as a white male saviour story (Butland 2022). If these women are able to form their own assembly, it is because two male politicians act as their interlocutors, bringing them out of the shadows, mediating with the political establishment on their behalf and helping them where they were unable to help themselves.

The film helps to elucidate the limitations of political change within existing economic and political frameworks as well as the tensions between materialism and idealism in ethical feminist theory. While culminating in political failure, the film delivers a powerful feminist message: gender inequality is not a natural evolution but a consequence of specific political arrangements and, in particular, of political choices made in the service of economic interests. If parliamentarians choose to preserve blatant gender inequalities in contravention of their own historically defined ideological principles, this is because such inequalities are profitable, allowing the economy to draw benefits from caring functions without recognising or remunerating them properly. The film fulfils the ethical feminist goal of a politicisation of care by pushing care work to the centre of mainstream political life. Yet, we have seen that this inclusion is not possible as *realpolitik*, within existing power structures, but only as an alternative political imaginary that exists outside of formal institutions. Organised within the National Assembly, the women's assembly serves to illustrate carers' political and economic exclusion from that space. While the women acquire voice and assert their rights within this temporary hiatus, the assembly does not bring about any material or structural changes to the conditions of their working lives. The film might be seen to reinforce the necessity for feminists to engage with political and economic structures in order to expose forms of social injustice and inequality, rather than idealising care and extricating it from those structures.

Conclusion

To date, 35 countries around the world have ratified the International Labour Organisation's Domestic Workers Convention (no. 189) that ensures equal rights and conditions in the care sector and promotes decent work for domestic workers worldwide. France has so far abstained from signing this agreement. When questioned about this, French government representatives stated, amongst other factors, that extending rights to care workers 'would increase the labor cost' (European Commission and European Migrant Network 2015). A 2024 INSEE report on secondary essential workers ('de deuxième ligne') placed home care workers, of whom 93.2% are women, in the lowest salary bracket of any other occupation (1576 euros net per month) (Sanchez Gonzalez and Sokhna 2024). Indeed, an agreement reached between employers and unions to raise their salaries above the minimum wage was rejected by the French government in February 2025.⁶ Despite its egalitarian political tradition, venerated Labour Code and progressive political rhetoric, France still excludes care workers from the most elementary

rights and protections afforded to other workers. This seeming contradiction is tolerated if not endorsed by political leaders in the strategic interests of the wider economy. Feminist economists show that gendered and racialised inequalities are strategically maintained as they allow the economy to function while free-riding on its human foundations (Fraser 2016). Furthermore, a financialised care sector generates profits by driving down labour costs and standards (Farris, Horton, and Lloyd 2024). The economic advantages of maintaining a low-cost, exploited and poorly organised care workforce seems to outweigh the French establishment's commitment to egalitarianism and social justice.

We have seen that for ethical feminists, care is a site of profound structural inequalities, yet it is also a 'source of power and possibility', offering a model for social transformation and an alternative feminist ethic (Harcourt 2023, 5). The aim of this paper was to explore the limitations and possibilities of the ethical feminist ideal of a politicisation of care. Ethical feminists have framed a powerful alternative social model rooted in the humanist and positivist social values that are the foundation of caring activities. In the face of an economic system that prioritises individualism and short-term economic gain, ethical feminists posit alternative values based on interdependence, responsibility and reciprocity, arguing that these are essential for society and human life to flourish. However, in celebrating the transformative potential of care, ethical feminists tend to extricate it from the economic order in which it is embedded and posit it as an abstract ideal or theoretical possibility. We have seen that some French care scholars reject the materialist approach of earlier feminists, arguing that a care model should be positioned outside of an economic order that devalues it. Recent scholarship also fails to engage with a major shift in neo-liberal economies: the rise of financialisation which has blurred the boundaries between the productive and unproductive and public and private sectors. If the ethics of care is to recover its radical potential and move beyond utopianism, it needs to reframe the outdated binary conceptualisation that separates care work from the productive and public economy.

We have seen that the transformative potential of care is impeded by concrete structural dynamics that continue to marginalise and exclude care workers. The film *Debout les femmes!* elucidates the myriad structural obstacles that prevent care workers acceding to equal rights and improved working conditions. This rejection is not an aberration, but is upheld by the majority of political representatives across the French National Assembly. The film is successful in vindicating a core argument of the materialist feminists: women's subordinate status is not a natural or biological evolution, but an outcome of deliberate political decisions made in the interests of the economy. While the film culminates in the symbolic and moral victory of care workers in their *assemblée des femmes*, this takes place not as realpolitik, but as a parallel symbolic universe constituted outside of formal politics. The film might be seen to reaffirm the importance of a materialist rather than an idealistic approach that reconstitutes political struggle at the centre of an establishment that subordinates and exploits feminised workers. This involves exposing the ways in which a French political system that espouses democratic principles deliberately denies rights to the majority of gendered and racialised care workers, in the interests of economic gain.

Notes

1. She notes that in Paris and the Paris region, 90% of care workers are migrants or of migrant origin.
2. Despite Orpea's malpractice and diversion of public funds for private profit, it was nonetheless bailed out by the state in January 2023 (the Caisse des dépôts et consignations) to save it from bankruptcy, making the French state its largest shareholder: <https://www.ft.com/content/73fad252-b6f4-40ea-b821-1debaf57ee4>.
3. <https://www.midilibre.fr/2022/01/26/scandale-des-ehpad-orpea-cette-grosse-somme-dargent-proposee-a-victor-castanet-pour-le-dissuader-denqueter-10069789.php>.
4. Loi n° 97–60 du 24 janvier 1997 tendant, dans l'attente du vote de la loi instituant une prestation d'autonomie pour les personnes âgées dépendantes, à mieux répondre aux besoins des personnes âgées par l'institution d'une prestation spécifique dépendance.
5. Such idealistic portrayals of elderly care in documentary films include *Les Équilibristes* (Michel 2019) based on end-of-life experiences in a palliative care setting, *Les Belles dames* (Marion Lippman et Sébastien Daguerressar 2019) based in care home for elderly women aristocrats in Paris, *Elle danse* (Waël Sghaier 2024) set in a care home in Aubervilliers and focused on themes of love, friendship and humour in daily life. These films contrast with the Quebec television documentary *La Dernière maison* (2022) that portrays institutional care as a tragic and unwanted condition and asks why the elderly cannot be cared for within the community
6. https://www.lemediasocial.fr/branche-de-l-aide-a-domicile-refus-d-agrement-de-l-avenant-de-revalorisation-salariale_T8r5Q7.

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