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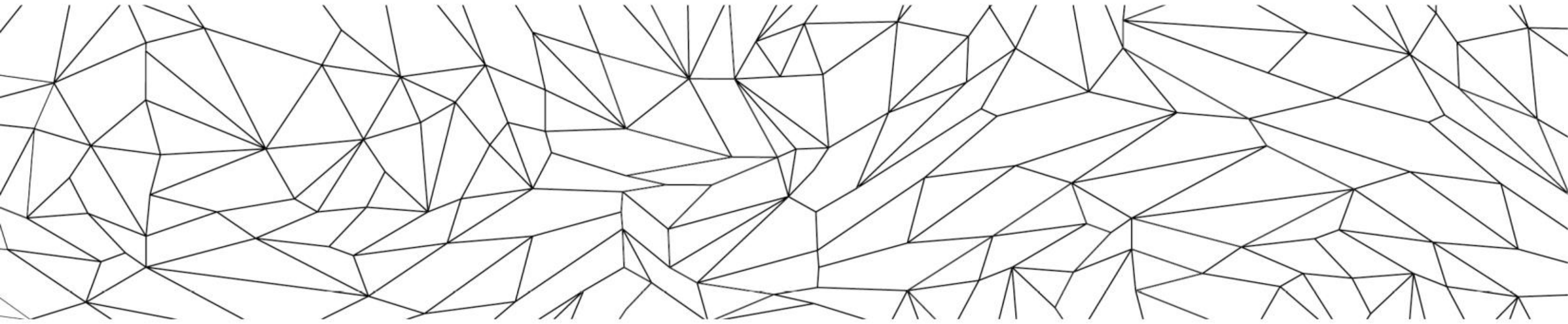

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Essential Work: Using A Social Reproduction Lens to Investigate the Re-Organisation of Work During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

COVID-19 has shaken a foundational pillar of global capitalism: the organisation of work. Whilst workers have commonly been categorised based on skills, during the pandemic the 'essential worker' categorisation has taken prominence. This paper explores the concept of essential work from a global feminist social reproduction perspective. The global perspective is complemented by a zoom-in on Mozambique as a low-income country in the Global South, occupying a peripheral position in global and regional economies and with a large share of vulnerable and essential workers. We show that the meaning of essential work is more ambiguous and politicised than it may appear and, although it can be used as a basis to reclaim the value of socially reproductive work, its transformative potential hinges on the possibility to encompass the most precarious and transnational dimensions of (re)production.

Keywords: COVID-19; essential work; social reproduction; dependence; Mozambique.

JEL classification: B54, F66, J46, J60, K31.

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1. Introduction

'The conditions created by the pandemic drive home the fact that we essential workers - workers in general - are the ones who keep the social orders from sinking into chaos. Yet we are treated with the utmost disrespect, as though we're expendable' wrote Sujatha Gidla on 5th May 2020 in the New York Times. She is a subway conductor in New York, who spoke about the slow and inadequate response of employers and authorities to ensure safer working conditions in the sector, leading to sickness and death among her fellow workers.

Taken up, for the most part, uncritically, as though holding intrinsic or intuitive validity and applicability, the categorisation of the workforce into essential and non-essential is a pivotal dimension of the re-organisation of work at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, as Ms Gilda's words expose, there are tensions embedded in the notion of 'essential work', in particular that between the essentiality and disposability of essential workers. Thus, whilst the essential work category was adopted suddenly and without scrutiny, many questions remain unanswered. What constitutes essential work? Is it the same across different contexts? Who are the essential workers? What and who are they essential for? Given the widespread adoption of this terminology and the associated legislation in many countries across the world, it is important to analyse the meanings, applications, implications, and, crucially, the transformative potential of categorisations of workers based on the notion of 'essentiality'.

This paper aims to investigate the notion of essential work, prior to and during the COVID-19 pandemic, through the use of a global feminist lens centred on social reproduction. It addresses two main questions. First, what is essential work and how has this terminology been used in different countries in the Global South and North? Through a review of the literature, decrees, policy documents and newspaper articles, we map the meanings of essential work across the world using as examples Brazil, England, India, Italy, Mozambique and South Africa. Second, taking as a starting point the claim made by social reproduction theorists that the recognition of forms of work that have been systematically devalued as essential offers a route to re-valorise socially reproductive work (Bhattacharya, 2020; Authors, forthcoming), we ask whether this potential has been tapped so far and, if not, what limitations, omissions and contradictions are preventing so. The global perspective is complemented by a zoom-in on Mozambique as a low-income country in the Global South, occupying a peripheral position in global and regional economies and with a large share of vulnerable and essential workers. The illustrations of Mozambique are based on primary research on work in the agro-industry conducted by the authors prior to the pandemic, in combination with the review of newspaper articles, policy documents, observations and selected primary evidence during the pandemic.

Our analysis shows that the meanings of essential work are much more ambiguous, politicised and fungible than assumed. At the same time, essential work classifications expose how the gendered and racialised constructions of the notion of skill contribute to uphold the devaluation of forms of work that are necessary to sustain life. However, a key question is whether the definition of socially reproductive work as essential can contribute to its re-valorisation. The global feminist social reproduction lens proves crucial to shed light on forms of essential work – unpaid and informal work – that are largely absent from the essential work classifications, an omission that denotes a productive and Western bias in the understanding of work realities that makes the notion of essential work particularly ill-suited to regulate the organisation of work in low-income countries with a large informal economy and widespread precarity. In addition, the national framing of the essential work legislation makes it inadequate to address the national-transnational and local-global interactions that shape the organisation of work, particularly in peripheral contexts. On this basis, we argue that the transformative potential of the notion of essential work will remain untapped unless it can be used to enhance the working conditions of the most vulnerable workers on a global scale.

The next section outlines the conceptual framework centred on a global social reproduction lens that allows us to see how COVID-19 is a crisis of productive and reproductive work intervening on already fragile and unequal dynamics of global (re)production. Section 3 investigates what constitutes essential work, section 4 discusses who essential workers are and how skill-based categorisations have upheld the gendered and racialised fragmentations of global working classes, section 5 interrogates what essential workers are essential for and discusses two critical shortcomings of current classifications; finally, section 6 concludes.

2. COVID-19 as a crisis of work through a global social reproduction lens

Initially a public health crisis, COVID-19 has exposed and exacerbated a global crisis of productive and reproductive work across the globe. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) has predicted that losses in working hours in the second quarter of 2020 will be equivalent to 400 million full-time jobs (ILO, 2020b) whilst informal workers, who make up around 90% of employment in low-income countries, saw their earnings decrease by 60% in the first month of the crisis (UN, 2020a). Moreover, nearly three-quarters of the world's domestic workers – over 55 million people – are at substantial risk of losing their income and job, threatening the social reproduction of themselves and those they work for (ILO, 2020d). Attempting to limit the health effects of the crisis has therefore triggered immediate and severe disruptions to the organisation of work, making COVID-19 an unprecedented crisis of production and reproduction (Mezzadri, 2020; Authors, forthcoming).

The crisis of work caused by COVID-19 is not merely a tragic consequence of a freak epidemiological event, but rather a manifestation of the existing systemic fragilities and inequalities of capitalism. In the latter's current iteration of globalised neoliberalism, capital's expanded search for cheap labour in the periphery has led to the restructuring of global production and the transformation of the working lives and means of social reproduction of citizens in the Global South (Amin, 1972; Cousins et al., 2018). The encroachment of capital on rural areas has forced many peasants to engage in various forms of agricultural and non-agricultural work to reproduce themselves (Bair, 2005; Bernstein, 2010; Cousins et al., 2018). The persistence of precarious work in the informal economy is a necessary subsidiary to these forms of global production (Bernards, 2019).

This configuration maintains countries in the Global South, particularly those in Sub-Saharan Africa, as providers of low-value commodities for the rest of the world to consume cheaply (Amin, 1972; UNCTAD, 2019). The high rates of economic growth observed in most African countries since 2000 tell a story of rising economies that conceals the volatile and costly nature of such growth, where Africa as a continent is a net contributor of payments to the rest of the world, particularly through returns on Foreign Direct Investments (FDIs) (Sylla, 2014). Thus, whilst mainstream development discourse promotes participation in global value chains (GVCs) as a route to growth and prosperity, in reality workers in the Global South are 'adversely incorporated' into GVCs (Phillips, 2011), marginalised from them and pushed into survivalist forms of work (Meagher 1995; Pattenden, 2016). This structure continues the legacy of colonialism and reproduces relations of dependence, which impede structural transformation and development in the Global South and maximise the extraction of surplus for the Global North (Emmanuel, 1972; Nkrumah, 1965; Sylla, 2014). The super-exploitation of workers through various mechanisms of the devaluation of work are central to relations of unequal exchange (Emmanuel, 1972; Elson and Pearson, 1981).

Feminists have long been engaged in the study of forms of work that are systematically devalued in capitalist systems (see Ferguson, 2019); in some cases, to the extreme of being denied the denomination of work altogether, from caring and domestic work (Dalla Costa and James, 1972) to sex work (Kotiswaran, 2011) and surrogacy (Vertommen and Barbagallo, forthcoming). The devaluation of work overwhelmingly performed by women – though not exclusively – is central to processes of capital accumulation on a global scale. Maria Mies (1986) discusses how global processes of primitive accumulation hinged on the exploitation of nature, colonisation and the subordination of women. Whereas colonisation underpins the international division of labour, 'housewifization' structures the household division of labour (*Ibid.*). An important mechanism through which women's work has been devalued and depoliticised is through its relegation to the home, which is constructed as a private sphere distinct from the so-called public sphere and governed by altruism and love (Folbre, 1986; Elias and Roberts, 2016).

Importantly, the devaluation of work typically performed by women does not stop at the fictitious boundaries of the household, but transcends into the labour markets encompassing various forms of commodified work that are constructed as low-skill and low-productivity occupations. Although some strands of feminism, especially White, have focused on the oppression of women through their roles as housewives, mothers and carers in the home, Black feminists have long argued that women are oppressed as labourers and the home itself has been a site of poorly paid, not unpaid, work for women of colour working as domestic workers (Davis, 1983; Glenn, 1992).

Mies (1986) does recognise that, differently from white women, women of colour in the former colonies could not afford to be housewives because their engagement in wage and paid work contributed to the family's survival and global capital's extraction of value. These patterns hold true for many women in the contemporary Global South, which we will illustrate below using the example of Mozambique. In addition, in the Global South, the separation between sites of production and reproduction is much more blurred and often various types of wage work are outsourced to home-based workers and other locations outside the factory (Mies, 1982; Mezzadri and Fan, 2018).

With the possibility of reproducing through self-subsistence increasingly being eroded in the Global South, and available wage work typically paying below what is necessary to reproduce, another strategy for reproduction under globalisation for those that can is to migrate for employment, frequently to ex-coloniser countries. For women migrants, this work is typically in the reproductive sectors of care, health and domestic work. The Global Care Chains (GCCs) literature documents how this results in an 'international division of reproductive labour' (Parrenas, 2005, p.237) which may involve family members in a poor country providing care for the children of a mother who engages in paid domestic work to look after the children of a mother who migrates to provide domestic work for a family in a richer country (Hochschild, 2000). Whilst Hochschild's seminal work focused on this domestic work reproductive chain, the same analysis applies to other caring services performed by migrant women in richer countries, such as nursing or sex work (Yeates, 2004). Through GCCs, the neo-colonial structure of productive work is mirrored in the reproductive sphere, as emotional surplus value is extracted from migrant women of periphery countries, who leave behind their own families to care for others in the core (Murphy, 2014). These dynamics are not only global but are also driven by regional and national systems of accumulation, hinging on various forms of gendered migration that underpin the reconfiguration of productive and reproductive work on grounds of gender, race and class. In southern Africa, for instance, the colonial labour regime constructed on circuits of migration of Black African men to the South African mines led to the increased prevalence of women-headed households or divided households, where women were left behind and became primary responsible for agricultural production alongside house work and care, with implications on labour and time constraints (O'Laughlin, 1998).

The redistribution of care resources, both globally and locally, exacerbate strained care systems, which are central to social reproduction but have been critically underfunded in the context of privatisation encouraged by the International Financial Institutions (Kentikelenis et al., 2015; O'Laughlin, 2016; Simeoni, 2020). The restructuring of health care systems has entailed the deterioration of working conditions for health-care workers in countries such as Tanzania and South Africa, which led to the migration of these workers to richer countries in the Global North (Valiani, 2012). Valiani (Ibid.) documents how the out-migration of nurses created shortages of nursing labour in African countries, thus amounting to a form of accumulation by dispossession. Women's migration away from their household poses a challenge for their own care responsibilities for dependent children and elderly relatives, if gendered structures of domestic work prevail and in the context of the privatisation of social reproduction, where the state is substantially absent or has withdrawn from public provisioning (Bakker, 2007; Razavi, 2011). Thus, socially reproductive work, whether unpaid or paid, has been subject to a long-term squeeze underpinning a global crisis of care prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Samman et al., 2016; Fraser, 2017).

Although most often treated distinctly, the dynamics of global production and reproduction are mutually constituted and in tension (Katz, 2001). Taking a social reproduction approach means centring this dialectical relation to understand the reproduction of life and labour within global capitalism; in particular, to assess the notion of ‘essential work’, we draw on the social reproduction perspectives that are concerned with social reproductive dynamics of labour processes and relations (Mies, 1986; Mezzadri, 2019; Mezzadri et al., forthcoming). These approaches highlight how the interdependence of production and reproduction is visible through both everyday life practices shaping the gendered organisation of productive and reproductive work, and through the historical essentiality of cheap and unpaid productive and reproductive work for capital accumulation, which currently encompasses under-paid global supply chain and domestic work as well as unpaid (care) work. In this sense, gender is a key relation in the dynamics of social reproduction but not one that operates in isolation from relations of class, race and citizenship status (Mies, 1986; Bannerji, 2011; Bhattacharyya, 2018). COVID-19 triggered a crisis of productive and reproductive work in this already fragile global picture.

The disruption of work has involved the re-charting of work practices and categorisations of workers, alongside the blunt withdrawal of labour from certain sectors that has resulted in job and income losses. A pivotal determinant of this reorganisation has been the categorisation of work as essential or not. During lockdowns, essential workers were required to continue working despite increased exposure to COVID-19 and without adequate or increased compensation. For non-essential workers, various forms of reorganisation took place. Some have shifted to home-based work; estimates suggest that prior to the pandemic only 7.9 percent of the global workforce worked from home regularly and, while this has increased significantly during the pandemic, variations across countries where workers can successfully transition to home-based working are striking, ranging from 6 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa to 30 per cent in North America and Western Europe (Berg et al., 2020). Thus, the possibilities to accelerate the shift towards home-based working are unevenly distributed and all but irrelevant for many workers in the Global South.

For non-essential workers who have been unable to work from home, outcomes have ranged from being furloughed through state provided job retention schemes to becoming unemployed. In the Global North, state investment in varying degrees has provided a security net for many of these workers, whilst some have been excluded such as migrants with no recourse to public funds in the UK (Butler, 2020). Yet, an estimated 55 per cent of the world’s population is unprotected by social protection programmes (ILO, 2017). Whilst many governments in the Global South have attempted to provide some kind of social security net, for most low-income countries, support to mitigate lost incomes is inadequate due to limited government revenue (ILO, 2017; 2020e). For workers in the Global south, therefore, being categorised as a non-essential worker and without access to social protection meant the evaporation of livelihoods. Faced with drastic alternatives between "to die from hunger or from the virus" (ILO, 2020c, p.1), informal vendors with support from the Human Rights Defenders Coalition in Malawi were successful in lobbying the High Court to block the Government's intended 21-day lockdown, so that citizens could continue to earn their living (Goitom, 2020). However, the withdrawal of lockdown orders has, of course, only benefited those whose jobs have not been lost due to falling global demand for goods produced in the Global South. The ILO has estimated that 292 million jobs in manufacturing supply chains, and 73 million jobs in textiles and garment supply chains are at high risk of being lost as many suppliers have had orders cancelled without any compensation (Anner, 2020; ILO, 2020a).

In parallel, reproductive work has intensified owing to heightened health care needs and overwhelmed hospitals, where health care capacity has been put to test also by the over-exposure of health care workers to the disease, the schools' closure and the increased care needs of older people (UN, 2020b). In essence, the burden of social reproduction has been further transferred and relegated to the home, thus deepening the long-term process of privatisation of social reproduction in neoliberalism (Bakker, 2007; Authors, forthcoming). This shift has triggered dynamics of renegotiation of reproductive work within families and households for which we do not have extensive data yet, but, for example, in the context of Hungary, a survey of couples has revealed that men are taking up more domestic and care work in the household (Fodor et al., 2020). Of course, this is not evidence that the pandemic will have positive overall effects on gender equality, it rather suggests that the gendered re-allocation of labour in households is likely to be multi-faceted, context-specific and complex. It remains that families have been forced to step in, with societal implications for the distribution of socially reproductive work and increased challenges for those with greater caring responsibilities and those facing more difficulties in combining productive and reproductive work, such as households with children, single parents and essential workers.

Thus, the re-organisation of productive work has ramifications for reproductive work, and vice versa. Crucially, the globalised nature of production and reproduction has meant that even in countries that did not have to bring their economies to a halt because the COVID-19 public health crisis was not acute so far, the economic repercussions have been nonetheless felt through the disruption of global (re)production networks. The recognition of these relations of dependence and interdependence operating at various scales is central to the analysis of the notion of essential work that will be developed in this paper. Our analysis will focus on how governments across the world have used the notion of 'essential work' and then assess, through a social reproduction lens, whether this concept can be appropriated and deployed to re-valorise forms of work that have been historically devalued within capitalism.

3. What is essential work?

Despite the large personal and societal consequences of a worker being classified as essential or not prior to the pandemic, the concept of essential workers appears in the literature sparsely and diffusely - typically during periods of crisis or exceptional circumstances - rather than as a universally recognised category of work. One of the earliest uses of the essential worker terminology appears during war-time periods and refers to workers that were needed domestically to “produce the necessary goods for civilian and military use” and were therefore exempt from military service (Dewey, 1984, p. 214). In the UK, Essential Worker Orders allowed the Government to divert military conscripts and women into essential industries such as mining, manufacturing, transport, agriculture and public services and employers were prohibited from sacking those covered by the Orders (O’Hara, 2007). More recently, references to essential and key workers in the literature have been made during other isolated events such as government shut-downs in the USA (Baker and Yannelis, 2017; Gelman et al., 2015), natural disasters (Whittle et al., 2012), and previous pandemics (Maunder, 2004; ECDC, 2009; Gershon et al., 2010). Interestingly, during the H1N1 2009 pandemic, the European Centre for Disease Control found that on the basis of their preparedness self-assessment visits, consensus between EU countries on what constitutes an essential worker was unlikely (ECDC, 2009).

There are some instances in the literature where the terms are used universally across countries, however, nuances exist which prevent a universal conceptualisation of essential work from arising.[1] For example, essential services are globally understood as specified groups of workers that are prohibited from strike action when doing so would be ‘a clear and imminent threat to the life, personal safety or health of the whole or part of the population’ (ILO, 2018, Article 836). However, *what* constitutes an essential service varies by country and circumstance (Knäbe and Carrión-Crespo, 2019). Similarly, within the immigration policies of several countries, workers with ‘essential skills’ deemed in short-supply domestically are eligible for employment visas. Yet, whether such essential workers are low-skilled, low-cost (and subsequently demonised) or high-skilled, high-paid (and subsequently privileged) varies by country (Guo, 2015; Stanley-Becker, 2013). Additionally, key workers are globally understood as low-to-average paid public employees who provide essential local services (nurses, police men, social workers etc) (Monk and Whitehead, 2011). However, the literature focuses exclusively on ‘the key worker problem’, that is, the inability of key workers to afford housing in high-cost areas, resulting in concerns over the supply of essential services (Adeokun and Isaacs-Sodeye, 2014; Battye et al., 2006; Karley, 2002; Morrison, 2003). Thus, the literature offers little consensus over who an essential worker is and what they are essential for.

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[1] There are additional universal yet non-relevant uses of these terms in the literature: front-line workers refers to customer-facing employees in the retail and hospitality sectors (Karatepe et al., 2010; Slåtten and Mehmetoglu, 2011; Yeh, 2013) and ‘street-level’ public service employees (Blomberg et al., 2015; Lipsky, 1983; Magadzire et al., 2014), and a key worker is a specific support role for vulnerable people (Brogaard et al., 2011; Hansson et al., 2001; McKellar and Kendrick, 2013).

The lack of universal conceptualisation surrounding essential workers has also been apparent during the pandemic. We analyse the use of essential work classifications in seven countries across the Global South and North: Brazil, Canada, England, India, Italy, Mozambique, and South Africa, as shown in Table 1 below.[2] Most countries that provide an explicit list of essential workers include sectors we intuitively recognise as being essential to daily life, such as health and social care, pharmacy and laboratory services, utility and energy providers, law enforcement, and the producers and distributors of food, drink and essential goods. However, whilst some countries have chosen to qualify what constitutes an 'essential good' such as South Africa, others have made the definition intentionally ambiguous, as in the UK. This has meant that in the UK, for instance, Amazon has been able to exploit the category of essential work to force its employees to continue working in an unsafe environment, despite them shipping non-essential items such as lawnmowers (Munbodh, 2020). In France, on the other hand, the Courts ordered Amazon to pay a fine of €100,000 per each good delivered outside the categories of IT, food, healthcare, beauty and self-care products and petcare, to ensure social distancing could be maintained in warehouses (Abboud and Lee, 2020). In India, rather than companies stretching the boundaries of essential work, certain states have instead attempted to make businesses exempt from labour laws, such as occupational health and safety and freedom of association, and brought in measures that permit them to hire and fire at will (Bhalla and Obhan, 2020). In Italy, the list of essential productive activities was the object of intense debate and negotiations among the government, the representatives of firms and the trade unions (Baratta, 2020; Conte, 2020). Thus, the presumed objectivity of essentiality is in fact politically negotiated and reflective of power relations between capital and labour, mediated by the state.

Most countries took a phasing approach to relaxing their lockdowns and allowed certain non-essential activities to resume.[3] In South Africa, after initially imposing an extremely strict lockdown including the ban of cigarettes and alcohol, the country was forced to downgrade lockdown measures asthe South African government's rescue package has been deemed inadequate to protect people and businesses (DW, 2020; Isaacs, 2020). Mozambique declared a State of Emergency but has not implemented a full lockdown so far, favouring instead measures of social distancing, rotation schemes in workplaces and partial reduction of economic activity (Castel-Branco, 2020). A UNU-WIDER study constructed an index of household readiness to the lockdown and estimated that only 7 percent of Mozambican households are 'fully ready' for a lockdown (Jones et al., 2020).[4]

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[2] We utilise the essential worker lists provided by countries during their highest level (most stringent) lockdowns whereby only those listed were officially permitted to continue working, however, these lists were subject to change throughout the pandemic. These are as follows: Brazil (Brazil Official Guidance, 2020), Canada (Canada Official Guidance, 2020b), England (UK Official Guidance, 2020b), India (India Official Guidance, 2020), Italy (Italy Official Guidance, 2020), Mozambique (Republic of Mozambique, 2020), South Africa (South Africa Official Guidance, 2020).

[3] England, Canada and Italy implemented strict lockdowns at their highest level until certain epidemiological criteria were met, such as sustained decreases in deaths and infection rates as well as sufficient hospital capacity, and lockdowns were downgraded to a lower level at the national level in England (with devolved powers to other parts of the UK) and with provincial discretion in Canada (Canada Official Guidance, 2020a; UK Official Guidance, 2020a).

[Table 1 here]

The selected countries have only 13 out of 53 essential work categories completely in common. The remaining categories are designated as essential in varying degrees across the countries. Following their unique geographical and economic contexts, essential workers include those employed in: agriculture, forestry and aquaculture in Canada, India, Italy, Mozambique and South Africa; natural disaster monitoring in Brazil, India and South Africa; and mining in Brazil, Canada, India, Italy and South Africa. In terms of manufacturing, all countries permit the production of inputs that are necessary for essential goods and services (metals, paper, chemicals, fertilisers etc.), whilst Brazil permits all industrial activities. Repair providers, such as electricians and mechanics, are permitted in all situations in Brazil, Canada, and India, with Italy taking this the furthest to include the repair of garden equipment, whilst South Africa only permits repairs in emergency situations. Similarly, maintenance work for infrastructure and machinery is permitted in all situations in Brazil, Canada, and Italy, but again only in emergency situations in South Africa. Brazil's list stretches the concept of 'essential' the furthest by including sports facilities, gyms, beauty salons and barbers, and allowing all religious activities, even during their most 'stringent' lockdown periods. Whilst the production and sale of food is listed as essential in all countries, Canada explicitly permits take-aways and food-delivery services, whilst South Africa allows hot-cooked food to be sold by delivery only. However, it should be noted that in practice countries have allowed other activities implicitly. For example, under the broad category of food services, take-aways remained open in England, and this category also presumably covers agricultural activities which were not explicitly listed in Brazil or Mozambique.

At the same time, some countries fail to include seemingly crucial work categories. From our list of selected countries, England does not explicitly list cleaning, janitorial or sanitation services as essential, whilst Brazil and Mozambique do not list carers. Brazil also revoked waste disposal services from its official decree (Brazil Official Guidance, 2020, Article IX). Only England and Canada list childcare services, the former with no restrictions, and the latter restricted this to child care for essential workers or home child services of less than six people. Italy and Canada list accommodation and real estate services without any restrictions, whilst India and South Africa list hotel and accommodation services for essential workers only, whereas Brazil, England, and Mozambique do not make explicit reference to housing in their lists. Only South Africa and Italy list paid domestic work, with the former restricting this to live-in staff only. In many countries in the Global South, those listed tend to be workers in formal occupations whilst the inclusion and, importantly, protection of informal workers has been much more ambiguous.

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[4] The index is based on whether the household has access to electricity, water, adequate sanitation, a phone and whether the household head is employed. The household readiness to a lockdown is very low overall and there is a striking difference between rural (only 2 percent fully ready and 14 percent partially ready) and urban households (17 percent fully ready and 61 percent partially ready).

By zooming in on Mozambique, we can briefly sketch the processes that led to the essential work classification deployed by the Mozambican government. In Mozambique, 88 percent of the workforce is informal and 66 percent work (waged and/or unwaged) in agriculture (INE, 2017); thus, in a crude and approximate way, this indicates that two thirds of the workforce is to be considered essential. However, two dynamics that characterise how the legislation was developed immediately point to some important limitations. First, a top-down approach was taken and the legislation was passed with no consultation with the trade unions, whose participation has been restrained to minimum wages negotiations in the narrow formal sector. Second, the essential work decrees reveal a detachment between the broader legislation governing labour markets and the reality of a productive structure of the economy dominated by irregular, informal, unstable and unsecure forms of work. An investigation into the reasons for such detachment are beyond the scope of the paper, but various literature has documented the neglect and poor understanding of labour markets perpetuated through neoliberal development agendas in Mozambique (Oya, 2013; Ali, 2016). It appears that the classification of essential work was based on so-called "general" or "traditional" criteria of activities that are "naturally seen as being essential to daily life, such as health, pharmacy and laboratory services, sale of foods and other basic wage goods and services".[5] In addition, according to the National Inspection of Economic Activities (INAE), the classification of essential activities within the food chain was intentionally broadly defined to allow for context-specific variations,[6] which also suggests differences in labour relations and employer-worker power relations across the country. In essence, the essential work legislation adopted in Mozambique is at odds with the reality of work in the country, which creates blind spots and limitations that we will discuss in section 5.

In sum, the essential work category has been deployed in scattered and heterogenous ways prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and, largely, its varying uses have continued during the pandemic. Although the notion of essentiality appears to bear a universal validity that captures activities that are necessary to sustain life, the uses of the essential work category reveal a degree of fungibility that reflects its political and socio-economic underpinnings. We now turn to questioning who the essential workers are whether essential work classifications can replace existing ones to improve the ways in which societies value work.

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[5] Interview with public officials at the State Secretariat for Youth and Employment (SEJE), 17th September 2020, Maputo.

[6] Based on personal communication with INAE inspector at a webinar on *"Clarifying the State of emergency in the Business Sector"*, 23rd June 2020, Maputo.

4. The mis-match between essentiality and skills: Who are the essential workers?

Whilst there is a lack of consensus over which occupations are essential, there is general agreement that these jobs are low-paid and disproportionately performed by people of colour, women and migrants. In the UK's capital, workers from Black and Asian Minority Ethnic (BAME) background make up a disproportionately large share of essential worker sectors, including 54% of food production, process and sale workers and 48% of health and social care workers (The Health Foundation, 2020). In the food sector, 30% of workers were born outside the UK, rising to almost half of food workers under the age of 40 (Sibieta et al., 2020). Moreover, women represent 60% of essential workers in the UK, despite only making up 43% of regular workers, and make up a staggering 80% of social care and education sector key workers (*Ibid.*). Across the board, essential workers are more likely to be low-paid than their non-essential counterparts, with 38% of essential workers earning below £10 an hour compared with 31% of non-essential workers (TUC, 2020). The proportion of workers earning less than £10 an hour strikingly rises to 71% of food sector workers and 58% of social care workers (Sibieta et al., 2020). Front-line care workers are also around three times as likely to be employed through an agency, which take a cut of their pay, and 5 times as likely to be on a zero-hour contract, compared to all workers (Cominetti et al., 2020).

In Brazil, 63% of domestic workers are Black women, less than 30% of domestic workers have formal contracts, with an even lower proportion for Black workers, and more than 2 million are undocumented workers who receive an average wage of $17 a day (Griffin, 2020; Pinheiro et al., 2019). In India, it is estimated that over 90% of sanitation workers belong to the lowest Dalit sub-castes (Bhatnagar, 2018). Across the Global South, work at the origin of agri-food chains is notoriously low-paid and internally fragmented, with the lowest-paid and most precarious segments often taken up by women and migrants (Tallontire et al., 2005; Selwyn, 2014). In Mozambique, pay and working conditions in the agro-industry are very poor, with workers often paid below the sectoral minimum wage owing to the use of production targets that are very difficult to meet and weak enforcement of employment contracts (Stevano and Ali, 2019). In addition, the legislation on sectoral minimum wages itself allocates lower wages to various essential occupations in relation to non-essential ones, with the exception of the production and distribution of electricity and water, and financial services (see Table 2 below). The monthly wages of workers in agriculture, health care (nurses) and public administration are at the bottom of the scale.

[Table 2 here]

The pandemic has therefore made strikingly visible the key tensions of social reproduction. Firstly, work which is essential for reproducing life is work that is typically seen as low-skilled and has been systematically under-valued. Secondly, the over-representation of women and minority groups in essential worker roles is a manifestation of the historical tendency of capitalism to differentiate, not homogenise, the working classes (Sanyal, 2007; Bhattacharyya, 2018) and of labour markets to be bearers of inequalities (Elson and Pearson, 1081; Authors, forthcoming).

Underlying the devaluation of many forms of work which are currently deemed essential is the contested notion of ‘skill’. Feminist literature has long been arguing that jobs which are over-whelming performed by women and minority groups are seen as low-skilled not because they fail to meet some objective requirement of skill, but because skill has been constructed in exclusionary and discriminatory ways (Steinberg, 1990, Steiger, 1993). For instance, customer- and patient-facing work in the service, care and health sectors requires an unrecognised degree of complexity and sophisticated social intelligence, and is therefore skilled emotion work (Bolton, 2004; Bolton et al., 2004; Kessler et al., 2015; Palmer and Eveline, 2012). Others suggest that care work is skilled knowledge work - albeit not acquired through formal education - since the knowledge and skills possessed by care workers greatly influences the quality of care provided (Börjesson et al., 2014; Nishikawa, 2011). It is argued that because such roles may involve “feminine qualities” that women naturally possess and find easy to use, the skill content goes unnoticed and unrewarded (James, 1989; Tancred, 1995).

This experience of “de-skilling” whereby minority groups are offered work below their actual skill level due to gender or racial discrimination is unfortunately still prevalent today. England and Boyer (2009) have documented how when clerical work became feminised, new kinds of work were created for women that were considered to be less skilled than the existing ones carried out by men. De-skilling is particularly prevalent for those who have migrated from a country which is perceived to be lower down the ranks of nationalistic and racialised hierarchies. Such workers, when migrating to a higher income country, are often presumed to be less skilled than natives of their host country or find that their formal qualifications are not recognised, meaning they have to engage in work below their skill level whilst they wait for their credentials to be recognised or to re-train entirely (Henderson et al., 2001; Shan, 2009, 2013; Cuban, 2013; Siar, 2013; Sert, 2016). For instance, female physicians and nurses from lower-income African countries faced having to wait between 2 and 10 years to practice at the level they were qualified after migrating to a variety of destinations in Europe and South Africa (Wojczewski et al., 2015). Minority migrant work is also de-valued, frequently paid less than citizen workers despite being equally qualified and working in the same occupation and the same skill level (Reitz et al., 2014). Through a combination of de-skilling and de-valuing one study found that migrants with Chinese or Black origin earned over $18,000 less a year and migrants with South Asian or other minority group origin earned $13,000 less a year, compared with British migrants (Li, 2008). Merely having a foreign accent or foreign sounding name often results in adverse participation in labour markets (Creese and Kambere, 2003). Job applicants with an Indian, Pakistani, or Chinese sounding name were shown to receive 15.7% fewer employer call-backs in Canada, despite having evidenced language proficiency, past experience and high quality education in the applications (Oreopoulos, 2011).

Essential work classifications expose how the gendered and racialised constructions of the notion of skill contribute to uphold the devaluation of forms of work that are necessary to sustain life. If the primary aim of the economy were to ensure social provisioning, as advocated by feminist economists (Power, 2004), work would be assessed based on its contributions to collective well-being, thus entailing a shift in what societies should value. The question is whether the notion of essentiality can potentially overcome the biases intrinsic to the skill-based categorisations and contribute to a re-valorisation of socially reproductive work centred on its importance in reproducing life. As the next section will show, the essential worker concept has to a large extent also been socially constructed to include and exclude certain groups of people. This will need to be addressed for the essential work concept to have transformative potential.

5. Essential for what? Tensions between reproducing life and reproducing exploitative relations

The recourse to the essential work category during the pandemic was intended to ensure the reproduction of life and that of capital, both to a degree, while significant parts of the economy were shut down. The inclusion and exclusion of different essential work categories across countries make it clear that these lists are open to exploitation by those who hold power. In England, the guidance was left "intentionally broad", stating that it was for "employers to decide who is a key worker" (ONS, 2020a, emphasis added). Similarly, in Canada it was stated that the essential services and functions listed at the national level could help the "private sector self-identify as essential" (Canada Official Guidance, 2020b). In Mozambique, some operations linked to gas extraction in the North, the largest foreign investment in the country, continued despite not being listed among the essential activities and new COVID-19 outbreaks emerged amongst these workers.[7] These examples require us to carefully question for what and for whom workers are essential. For the reproduction of life and society or for capital and the capitalist class? Can we re-valorise the reproduction of human life without reproducing capitalist relations of exploitation?

A significant limitation of the essential work classifications is their focus on formal and paid work, which excludes much work that is essential for the reproduction of life taking place in the informal economy and on an unpaid basis. This narrow focus reflects both a productivist and a Western bias: the former obscures the centrality of significant parts of reproductive work that regenerate life, the latter conceals the work realities of the vast majority of the working population in the Global South because it suggests that workers have one main occupation whilst livelihoods are most often constructed on a multiplicity of occupations. We will detail how these biases make the notion of essential work inconsequential and ill-suited in the Mozambican context.

As mentioned, the majority of the Mozambican workers are considered to be essential but the re-organisation of work has created tensions linked to the failure of the government to provide alternatives for disrupted and destroyed livelihoods. For example, informal goods and food markets in some parts of Mozambique, including in the capital city of Maputo, have been temporarily closed and street vendors removed from the streets, despite their resistance, to prevent the spread of the virus. These interventions of so-called ‘requalification’ were accompanied by the promise that informal market and street vendors will be given new spaces to run their activities but the government has not yet fulfilled this promise. Many vendors of essential products such as foodstuff, who are women, have therefore been left without a livelihood and do not have access to social protection (O País, 2020).

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[7] See this news reported on 8th April 2020 https://www.saudemais.tv/noticia/12307-COVID-19-obras-de-megaprojeto-de-gas-natural-reduzidas-ao-essencial-em-mocambique.

Importantly, the extractive productive structure, highly concentrated in natural resources and primary commodities for export, with weak or no linkages to other sectors of the economy, is unable to generate regular, stable and secure work opportunities (Castel-Branco, 2014; Ali, forthcoming). Historically, work structures and labour markets have been multiple and interconnected as working people have had to shoulder the responsibility for social reproduction (O’Laughlin, 1981; Oya et al., 2009), but the commodification of life and the associated fragmentation of the means of social reproduction have intensified households’ necessity to resort to multiple precarious and low-paid forms of work over time (Cousins et al., 2018; Ossome, this issue). This creates a vicious cycle whereby productive structures skewed towards extraction and exports of primary commodities in combination with a very limited welfare regime underpin the existence of precarious work and, in turn, workers’ necessity to engage in multiple forms of work subsidises capitalist production for export, thus maintaining poor working conditions in wage work.

This vicious cycle can be seen through the everyday organisation of the working lives of workers in the agro-industry. Figure 1 below illustrates, in a simplified manner, the interdependent nature of various forms of work, and how they are embedded in practices of debt and savings management. From these interconnections, two important insights emerge: first, wage work in the agro-industry cannot be understood in isolation from other types of work and money flows; second, a crisis in one of these domains has effects on others, with the potential to impact individual and household well-being.

[Figure 1 here]

Income from wage work enables agro-industry workers to: (i) finance consumption of wage goods, (ii) partly acquire food through purchase, (iii) have an investment base in alternative productive activities, including the financing of their own farm and (iv) respond to shocks. Informal savings groups (*xitique*) with colleagues at work provide a social safety net in case of unexpected events and are used to make investments in parallel cash-earning activities.

These dynamics of interdependence are not limited to the agro-industry but shape working lives marginalised from global production networks (Authors, forthcoming) and, anecdotal and scattered evidence suggests, in the public sector too, as exemplified by this quote that highlights the problem of low wages for health care workers in the public sector:

“We sacrifice our lives, but there [in the public hospital] there is no life… For instance, I have to do other activities to help our livelihood including small-scale agricultural production [...] Given the low wages, I had the opportunity to move to a private hospital where I currently receive nearly three times as much as the wage in the public hospital and have better working conditions.” Interview with male nurse, 50 years old, former nurse in a public hospital for 35 years and currently a worker in a private hospital in Maputo, 7th July 2020.

Where labour markets are so segmented and various realms of production and reproduction so interconnected, the use of the essential work category needs to account for diverse and intersecting working lives. On the one hand, the divides between formal and informal need to be overcome to offer social protection to essential workers in both the formal and informal economies (Castel-Branco, 2020). On the other hand, the interdependence of occupations means that the interrelations between essential and non-essential work are much tighter, in fact they are often embodied by the same worker. Thus, the use of the essential work classification needs to account for these work realities and provide specific guidance for workers engaged in essential and non-essential occupations.

It is evident that simply branding some forms of work as essential while not ensuring better pay, working conditions and health protection for the workers is not only tokenistic but in fact harmful. Whilst the importance of essential workers is recognised, their disposability is reinforced by asking them to continue to work amidst lack of safety and inadequate protective equipment (Gidla, 2020). In addition, where the disposability of workers hinges on their engagements in multiple forms of work, the notion of essentiality needs to account for this too. The structural precarity of work is upheld by a system of exploitation and oppression, reproduced through international relations of exchange and national regulation, that, unless put into question by the essential work definition, risks being replicated through the definition of an *essential production boundary* that suffers from a productivist and a Western bias. If recognising the essentiality of work cannot counter the fragmentation of working lives, then the predominant conditions of exploitation are perpetrated.

A second limitation of the essential work classifications pertains to the narrow applicability of the essential work category to labour processes circumscribed by national boundaries, often accompanied by further divides between citizen and migrant labour. This is a significant shortcoming that, unless addressed, will reproduce the underlying relations of dependence and oppression that shape exchange between countries, especially South-North relations, and the gendered and racialised fragmentations of the working classes across and within countries.

Contemporary systems of production and reproduction have a globalised nature, as outlined in section 2, which implies that the organisation of work through control regimes as well as the ability of workers to collectively organise and bargain for better working conditions are determined through the interplay of various actors – the state, workers and capital – operating both nationally and transnationally (see for example Selwyn, 2014; Pattenden, 2016; Baglioni, 2018; Mezzadri and Fan, 2018; Hardy and Hauge, 2019. The recognition of the interdependent nature of work needs to be accompanied by the understanding of the interactions between local and transnational dynamics of capital accumulation. In other words, it is necessary to disembed the notion of essentiality from the practice of methodological nationalism, both conceptually and in policy terms. The need to overcome methodological nationalism, defined as the study of economic processes as driven by internal factors seen as separated from external ones (Pradella, 2014), has been articulated in studies of migrant labour (Hanieh, 2015; Pradella and Cillo, 2015). The transnational nature of the reserve army of labour underpins the processes of liberalisation and segmentation of labour markets observed in Europe in the aftermath of the 2008 global financial crisis (Pradella and Cillo, 2015). How the essential work classification is deployed needs to be assessed against this backdrop, where the transnational dimensions of the fragmentation and dependence of the global working classes include migrant labour and encompass the livelihoods of households and communities linked to migrant labour and migratory flows. Although some of these circuits have been severely disrupted at the beginning of the pandemic, as discussed in section 2, it is also evident that reliance on migrant labour and global network of (re)production has not ceased so far – in fact some governments have acted to ensure access to migrant workers, as outlined below; ultimately, the long-term restructuring of these dynamics will depend on the duration of the pandemic and the responses to it in later phases.

In Mozambique, within-country mobility of workers is crucial to various forms of labour. For instance, the disrupted mobility of traders across the country, price fluctuations driven by demand bottlenecks, and famers' reduced ability to mobilise labour owing to the lower mobility of people all contribute to create negative impacts for Mozambican farmers that were visible already at the beginning of the pandemic (Zamchiya et al., 2020). In addition, the scarce employment opportunities generated by the extractive productive structure of the economy has underpinned a long-term flow of migrants to South Africa. Mozambican migrants in South Africa transferred the highest level of remittances across southern Africa in 2006 and the remittances received peaked in 2018, when they reached almost 300 million USD constituting 2.5 percent of national GDP (World Bank, 2011; Migration Data Portal, 2020). With the imposition of the lockdown in South Africa, over 14,000 Mozambican migrants returned to Mozambique (IOM, 2020) and the consequences for the livelihoods of those reliant on remittances are likely to be severe, although the current lack of data and studies prevent our ability to outline the exact impacts. Globally, remittances have grown much faster than FDI in the last decade and have constituted a mechanism of support for countries in the face of economic shocks; the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that global remittances will collapse by 20 percent, which constitutes a global threat (Sayeh and Chami, 2020). Thus, even where work has been classified as essential, the disrupted mobility of workers and goods within countries and across countries alongside the limited fiscal capacity of a low-income country such as Mozambique has not offered protection to essential workers.

On the other hand, difficulties in recruiting migrant labour have emerged in receiving countries. The UK faces a shortage of at least 90,000 workers in the food sectors and, in response to this challenge, the recruitment practices have become more ruthless and less regulated, with workers reporting at best mixed practices in regard to the implementation of COVID-19 measures on the workplace (Barnard et al., 2020).

Similar shortages and dubious practices to recruit migrant workers have been documented across Europe (Rogozanu and Gabor, 2020; Arquinigo Pardo, 2020). The Italian government developed a proposal for the 'regularisation' of migrant agricultural and domestic workers who have been living and working in the country illegally, which has been strongly opposed by the agricultural workers for failing to encompass many workers for bureaucratic reasons and for arbitrarily including the workers of essentially two sectors while excluding others (Gaita, 2020). During the pandemic, the UK government preliminarily passed a new Immigration Bill that would make many migrant essential workers ineligible for work visas (Syal, 2020) and many migrant NHS workers and carers were forced to continue paying a fee to use the NHS themselves (Marsh and Gentleman, 2020). In India, the plight of millions of migrant workers suddenly left with no livelihood nor protection in the urban areas forced them to defy the lockdown and return to the native rural areas (Shah and Lerche, 2020). While the pandemic has made this vulnerable and hidden workforce more visible (*Ibid.*) and parts of this workforce recognised as essential, this has not been sufficient to ensure better and safer working conditions for these workers. Their treatment remains overall instrumental to ensure the availability of a cheap and vulnerable workforce to capital.

In sum, the essential work classifications have recognised certain workers as indispensable but have not been used to subvert the relations of power that make them disposable. Even if the work of essential workers has certainly contributed to reproduce life during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, as it always does, the significant omissions that are visible through a global social reproduction lens demonstrates that the vast majority of vulnerable workers have not had their conditions of reproduction safeguarded. Their expulsion from work, despite their essentiality, and relegation to highly precarious livelihoods reproduces and in fact aggravates existing dynamics of exploitation.

6. Conclusions

This paper investigated the notion of essential work, tracing its uses prior to the pandemic and then analysing how it has been deployed across different contexts at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We take a global feminist lens centred on social reproduction and use Mozambique as an example of a low-income country in the Global South situated in a peripheral position in global and regional economies to assess the use, applicability and consequentiality of the essential work classifications. Four main findings emerge. First, there was no consensus on the meaning of essential work prior to COVID-19 and, to some extent, the ambiguity has been reproduced during the ongoing pandemic as, contrary to what may have appeared from newspaper headlines and governments' announcements, the essential work classifications has been deployed differently across countries. How essential work has been defined reflects partly specific socio-economic contexts and, importantly, is determined by political decisions and negotiations bearing relations of power between the state, capital and workers. Second, the adoption of the essential work categorisations has starkly revealed how many forms of essential work are typically considered low-skilled. This leads to interrogating the notion of skill, which brings to light the gendered and racialised fragmentations of global working classes upheld by skill-based categorisations of work. The question remains whether classifications based on essentiality have the potential to overcome these problems.

Third, a social reproduction perspective shows that many types of essential work are forms of socially reproductive work necessary for the reproduction of life that nonetheless have been systematically under- and devalued in global capitalist systems. However, both unpaid reproductive and informal work are largely excluded from the *essential productive boundary*. This means that, in the ways in which the essential work classifications have been used so far, the productivist and Western biases of work are reinforced, which make the notion of essential work particularly ill-suited and inconsequential in low-income peripheral economies. In addition, and finally, these legislations do not recognise the interplay between national and transnational actors and dynamics in shaping labour markets and labour relations. Thus, the relations of dependence between core and peripheral countries in global and regional economies substantially limit the ability of peripheral countries to protect essential workers through national legislation, whilst the fragmentation of the working classes is reproduced through the continued exploitation of migrant workers.

The essential work categorisation has been deployed by governments in tokenistic and politicised ways, which has had the effect of jeopardizing the working conditions of essential workers by making them more vulnerable to the disease and treating them as disposable. Of course the notion of essentiality ought to be used to advance a political argument that these workers need to be recognised and rewarded enhanced socio-economic status through better pay and working conditions, which may happen in the future depending on collective mobilisation on these issues. This could materialise through the recognition that work which sustains life is indeed skilled work, or through the decoupling of pay from skill entirely and instead rewarding work based on its direct contribution to sustaining life.

However, some important caveats remain. In addition to the dangers of creating a working class divided between essential and non-essential, as posited by Bergfeld and Farris (2020), the notion of essentiality also risks perpetuating relations of dependence between peripheral and core economies, as well as working classes, unless it is deployed to protect the most vulnerable workers - unpaid workers, the global reserve army of labour in the informal economy particularly in the Global South, and migrant workers. This entails a better understanding of socially reproductive work in the Global South and the development of an internationalist narrative cognizant of relations of unequal exchange. Only a radical re-framing of global relations of production and reproduction can ensure that peripheral economies can deploy essential work legislation to effectively protect the lion’s share of essential workers globally.

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Table 1: Essential work classifications in Brazil (BR), Canada (CA), England (EN), India (IN), Italy (IT), Mozambique (MZ) and South Africa (SA)

Essential work categories	**BR**	**CA**	**EN**	**IN**	**IT**	**MZ**	**SA**
Air, water, road, rail transport services that are in operation during Covid-19	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Financial services (banks, building societies, insurance companies etc)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Health care and mental health services	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Journalism, broadcasting, telecommunications, print and electronic media	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Oil, gas, water, electricity, sewerage services	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Pharmacy and Laboratory services	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Production, processing, storage, distribution and sales of food, drink, medicine, hygiene products and other essential goods	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Security, defence and safety services (Police, armed forces, peace officers, transport police, border and customs officers etc)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Animal welfare and veterinary services	x	x		x	x	x	x
Government and charities essential to effective delivery of Covid-19 response/ essential public services / social and welfare services	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
IT and data infrastructure	x	x	x	x	x		x
Payment services	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Prison, probation, courts and tribunal, and judiciary staff	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Manufacturing and sale of inputs for essentials goods (chemicals, fertiliser, minerals, metals, equipment etc)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Waste disposal services		x	x	x	x	x	x
Care work		x	x	x	x		x
Cleaning, janitorial and sanitation services	x	x		x	x	x	x
Emergency services	x	x	x	x		x	x
Fire and rescue services	x	x	x	x		x	x
Management of the deceased and funeral services	x	x	x	x		x	x
Mining	x	x		x	x		x
Postal services	x		x		x	x	x
Agriculture, forestry and aquaculture activities		x		x	x	x	x
Repair work (plumbers, electricians, locksmiths, glaziers, roof repairs, mechanics, refrigeration and ventilation repairs etc)	x	x		x	x		
Social work	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Natural disaster monitoring (e.g. of damns, floods)	x			x			x
Hotel and accommodation services for Covid-19 response		x		x			x
Maintenance services (e.g. of infrastructure equipment, facilities, machinery, and buildings)	x	x			x		
Teachers and education professionals (according to guidance)		x	x		x		x
Accommodation/ real estate services (not restricted to Covid-19 response)		x			x		

Activities whose production process cannot be interrupted without damage (e.g. steel, aluminium, ceramic and glass production)	x			x			
Animal and plant disease and pest control services	x						x
Civil construction activities	x				x		x
Food safety, sanitary and phytosanitary, environmental, agricultural or labour inspections	x	x				x	x
Industrial activities (not restricted to essential goods)	x						
Transport and logistics of listed essential goods for import and export						x	x
Beauty salons and barbers	x						
Car rental services	x						
Child care services (restricted to for essential workers and home child care services of less than six children only)		x					
Childcare services (no restrictions)			x				
Development of products and services, including start-ups	x						
Maintenance services (emergency only)							x
Online retail/ e-commerce (no restrictions)		x					
Online retail/ e-commerce for essential goods only	x			x		x	x
Paid domestic work (any)					x		
Live-in domestic staff							x
Religious activities of any nature	x						
Religious staff			x				
Repair work (emergency only)							x
Sports facilities and gyms	x						
Essential services as defined in previous pandemics							x
Head office and consulting activities					x		
Trade union essential staff for essential workers							x

Source: Compiled by the authors

*Methodological note: Most of the countries in our selection disaggregate their essential worker categories as groups of related activities and services, that is, more aggregated and context specific than Industry or Occupation classification levels. The two exceptions are Italy, who provide their list at the Industry Level according to their National Classification of Economy Activity (ATECO, 2007) which is their national version of the European NACE (NACE, 2006, p. 61) and corresponds to the International Standard Industrial Classification of all Economic Activities of the United Nations (ISIC) (ISIC, 2008, p. 45), and Canada, who provide their list at the worker level, but do not match this to a National or International classification of occupations. For statistical purposes, the UK's Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2020a, 2020b) matched the essential workers provided in the Government Guidance to their National version of the ISIC, and the International Standard Classification of Occupations (ISCO) (ISCO, 2008, p. 68). Matching the service/ activity categories of all our countries to either the ISIC industry classification or the ISCO occupation classification would have provided international standardisation. However, both categorisations prohibited concision due to the level of detail, even at their most aggregated boundary (the UK's ISCO-mapped list contained 211 occupations, for example), whilst also being unable to accommodate services/ activities unique to Covid-19 responses. Therefore, as a compromise between standardisation, detail, concision, and contextualisation, we choose to provide our own standardisation at the level of activity/ service groups.

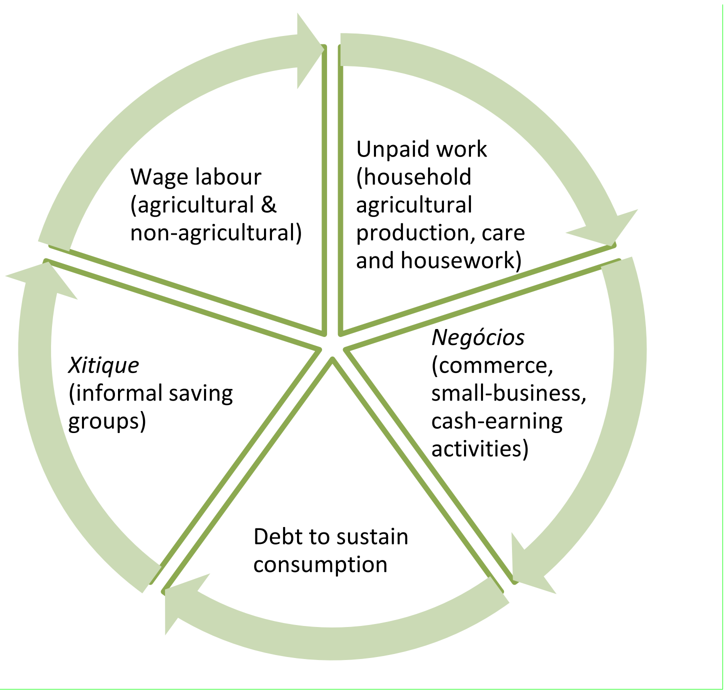
Table 2: Sectoral monthly minimum wages in Mozambique

Sector	**Monthly minimum wage in USD (MZN)**
Agriculture*	62.43 (4,390)
Extractive industry	131.60 (9,254)
Manufacturing	99.54 (7,000)
Production and distribution of electricity and water*	118.03 (8,300)
Financial services, banks and insurance companies*	181.46 (12,760)
Nursing*	74.97 (5,272)
Nursing assistance*	63.54 (4,468)
Public administration, defence and security*	63.54 (4,468)
Hotel industry	92.12 (6,478)

*Essential activity

Source: Compiled by the authors using data from the National Institute of Social Security (INSS) and information on minimum wage for nurses and nurse assistants based on interviews conducted in July 2020

Figure 1: Interdependence of wage and reproductive work through money flows


Wage labour (agricultural & non-agricultural)
Unpaid work (household agricultural production, care and housework)
Negócios (commerce, small-business, cash-earning activities)
Debt to sustain consumption
Xitique (informal saving groups)

Source: Ali and Stevano (2019), based on semi-structured interviews with workers in the Mozambican agro-industry (forest plantations and cashew processing factories)