Demography of Care in the Global South

(Draft version)

Jackeline Aparecida Ferreira Romio

UNICAMP

jackeline.romio@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper introduces the concept of a "demography of care" to analyze how global demographic transitions, marked by declining fertility, population aging, and shifting migration patterns, are reshaping care dynamics, especially in the Global South. Drawing on demographic theory and a gender-based lens, the analysis emphasizes how care work, often unpaid or precarious, remains disproportionately performed by women and ethnic minorities. The paper highlights that the global decline in fertility is not experienced uniformly, with countries in the Global North facing rapid aging, while many in the Global South still experience youth challenges and unmet social needs.

Through a bibliometric review of recent academic research on fertility, migration, and demographic transition, the study reveals increasing interest in the intersection between migration and fertility adaptation in low-fertility countries. The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed structural inequalities in the global care economy, accelerating health worker migration and emphasizing the reliance of high-income countries on care labor from the Global South.

Additionally, the paper explores the value of time-use surveys to measure care work and maps their limited availability, particularly in the Global South. The final discussion advocates for an inclusive demographic agenda that recognizes care as both a labor and policy concern. It calls for intersectional, rights-based policies to ensure equitable care systems and social protection in an era of demographic transformation.

Introduction

In this paper, we aim to explore three key concepts to gain a better understanding of the current global demographic context: the South, demographic change, and care. We aim to present evidence that a significant aspect of knowledge regarding demographic phenomena remains underrepresented in the current discourse on demographic trends. This concerns the southern experience of these changes and the implications of partial explanations for the future of the global population when only one perspective is used to define the population agenda worldwide. Secondly, we aim to present data and evidence to highlight the implications of demographic change for women, young people, ethnic minorities and older people in low- and middle-income countries.

The concept of the Global South emerged in the context of postcolonial and decolonial studies to address the specificities of populations that have been systematically exploited and marginalised for centuries due to colonialism, imperialism, patriarchy and the capitalist system, and which have resisted many forms of exclusion. To address these inequalities, epistemological approaches such as those of Boaventura de Sousa Santos suggest that we must shift our focus and listen to the diverse knowledge and perspectives that have been obscured by the hegemonic discourse of power from imperialist and colonised countries. Thus, the Global South is a term that refers to countries that have historically been marginalised in the international arena, associated with experiences of colonialism, poverty, and with development of serious challenges such as access to health service and education. (Dos Santos, 1995)

In this paper we use the concept of Global South to understand how a homogenized understanding of demographic change can be harmful particularly for countries in the Global South and their populations, especially women, youth, and migrants, who are often misrepresented in mainstream demographic theories. Even globally accepted frameworks like the demographic transition or demographic dividend can be misleading when applied uncritically, reinforcing misinterpretations and policy gaps.

A similar trend occurs in demography, where the dominant theories and perspectives are often based on the experiences of the Global North, sidelining the realities of demographic change in the Global South.

Demographic transition in the 21s century

Demographic transition in the 21st century has brought about a significant shift, marked by low and very low fertility rates in many countries worldwide. This demographic change, combined with rising life expectancy, the expansion of care labor migration, and increasing
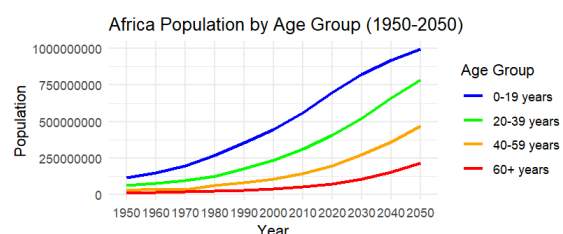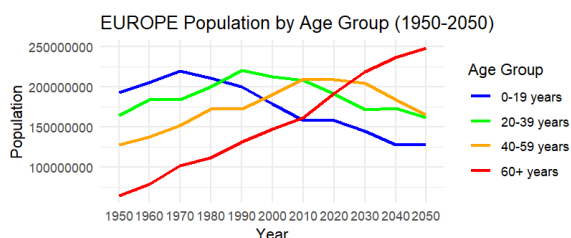
gender-based violence, has created growing demands on health and public care systems, particularly in middle- and low-income countries.
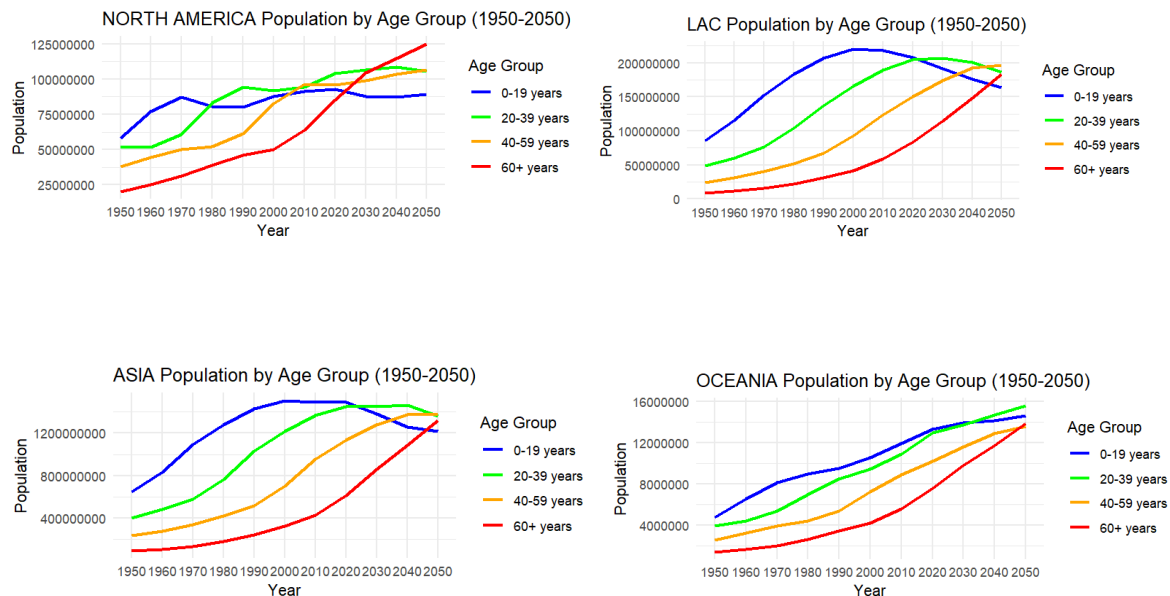
These dynamics call for a deeper examination of population policies, inequalities, and gender relations. Addressing the evolving challenges of care, migration, and aging requires us to rethink the intersection of demographic trends with social structures and the distribution of labor across genders.

To effectively tackle these issues, a comprehensive approach is necessary, one that integrates economic, social, and cultural factors. Such an approach is vital for crafting public policies that not only manage demographic shifts but also promote gender equality and intergenerational solidarity in a sustainable and equitable manner.

Demographic change globally is diverse

The demographic trajectories across world regions between 1950 and 2050 reveal significant diversity in the pace and direction of population aging and age structure transformation. Africa stands out for its sustained and steep growth in the population under 40, especially in the 0–19 group, signaling a prolonged youthful demographic profile. In contrast, Asia shows a shift from a dominant younger population toward a rapidly expanding 60+ age group, indicating a swift aging process in the coming decades. Europe and North America already exhibit advanced aging, with their 60+ populations surpassing all other groups by 2050, and a steady decline in the 0–19 segment. Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) display a transitional pattern, once dominated by youth, but now seeing fast growth in older age groups and a projected decline in the youngest cohorts. Oceania, though smaller in scale, follows a moderate aging path, with all age groups increasing but with faster relative growth in those aged 60 and over. These diverse patterns reflect varying stages of demographic transition and underscore the need for region-specific policies addressing both youth-centered development and aging population challenges.

NORTH AMERICA Population by Age Group (1950-2050)

LAC Population by Age Group (1950-2050)

ASIA Population by Age Group (1950-2050)

OCEANIA Population by Age Group (1950-2050)

Public interesting the demographic change by google trends analysis

Population aging is not uniform across the region, with varying rates and patterns of demographic change. The accelerated shift toward low and very low fertility rates has significantly altered the age structure and composition of populations. COVID-19 pandemic has further impacted the epidemiological profile of mortality from preventable causes, exacerbating socioeconomic challenges for the older population.

To explore long-term public interest in key demographic change topics, I used the Google Trends API for R to retrieve global search trends for the terms "aging population," "low fertility," "high fertility," and "decline population" from the earliest available period to the present. This analysis aimed to identify temporal patterns and shifts in attention to these themes over time. The resulting visualization revealed a steady and growing interest in "low fertility" and "aging population," particularly after 2020, likely reflecting increasing global concern about declining fertility and the challenges of aging societies. Searches for "low fertility" have shown a marked upward trend, surpassing the 25-point threshold post-2020. Meanwhile, "aging population" and "population decline" maintained lower relative interest (around 10 points), but both showed notable increases between 2020 and 2021, possibly influenced by heightened demographic awareness during the COVID-19 pandemic. In contrast, "high fertility" consistently received high attention (around 75 points throughout the period), but has shown a gradual decline in interest, especially around 2020, which may also relate to the pandemic. These trends suggest a shifting global focus toward demographic transition issues, particularly the implications of low fertility and population aging.

Figure 1. Global search interest over time for selected demographic terms.
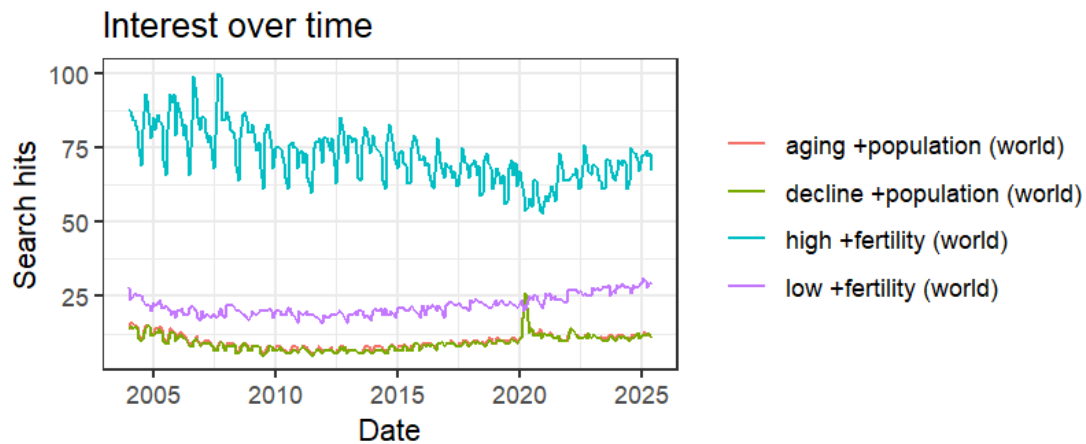
Source: Google Trends via gtrendsR (accessed June 2025).

To explore public interest in gender-related aspects of care, I used the Google Trends API in R (gtrendsR package) to analyze global web search trends over time for the terms "care + elderly," "care + migrant," "care + children," and "care + work." This selection aimed to capture attention to different dimensions of caregiving, across age, migration, and labor contexts.

The query retrieved data on search interest from the earliest available date up to the present, with global coverage and no geographic filters. The interest_over_time object within the PopTrendsGender output contains the time series data used to generate the plot. By using plot(PopTrendsGender), I visualized how public attention to these topics has evolved.

Although the graphic itself provides detailed insight, preliminary analysis suggests that "care + work" and "care + children" tend to attract higher and more consistent interest over time, possibly reflecting ongoing societal debates around work-life balance and childcare responsibilities. In contrast, "care + elderly" and "care + migrant" may show more variable or episodic attention, potentially linked to specific policy shifts or crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic or migration surges. Aspects of care are prioritized in public discourse, and how gender roles and responsibilities intersect with care provision across different populations.

Interest over time
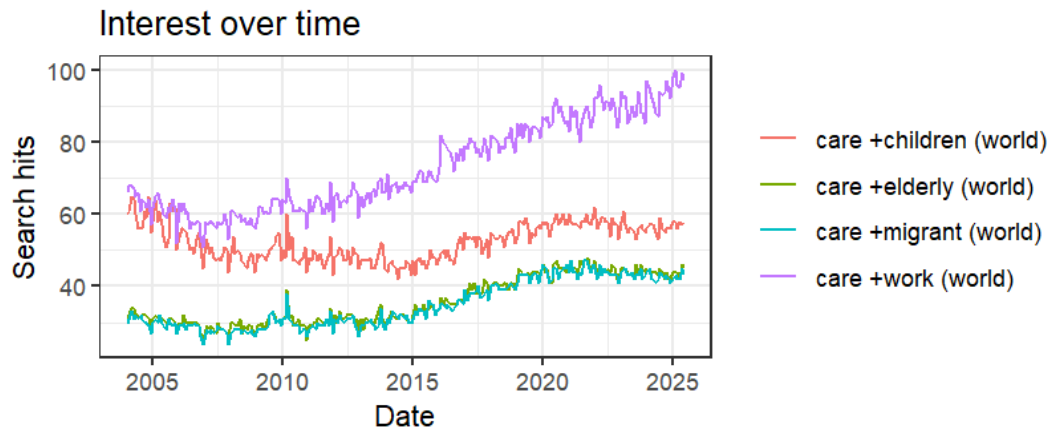
Source: Google Trends via gtrendsR (accessed June 2025).

Understand the discourse on demographic change in basis to track research in the field of fertility

The decline in fertility has been a fundamental issue for demographers worldwide since the beginning of the 21st century. This is because the majority of countries have shown fertility rates below what is considered the "replacement level," generally defined as 2.1 children per woman. This has contributed to population aging and related consequences.

In this context, demographic transition theory, which essentially consists of the shift from high number of birth and fertility rates to low and moderate levels, through an intermediate period where a decline in mortality precedes a decline in birth rates, resulting in rapid population growth and them a slow decline in the future stages, remains a crucial theoretical framework for interpreting the social forces and trends.

To address the pertinence of the theme in the field of demography and demographic transition we conducted a systematic bibliographic analysis focused on identifying the main subjective themes explored in academic literature that considers fertility as a key element in the theory of demographic transition. We conducted the search exclusively on the JSTOR digital library using the keyword "fertility" within peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2020 and 2025. The initial search returned 334 results. After removing repeated entries and excluding articles that addressed fertility in unrelated fields such as biology, the final sample consisted of 264 papers. The articles were organized in a Google Sheet and analyzed using the tidytext package in R to extract, categorize, and quantify recurring themes. For this analysis, we also excluded the seven papers published in 2025, resulting in a final sample of 257 articles.

Our analysis revealed a wide diversity of research approaches to fertility, reflecting both classic and emerging concerns in demographic studies. A significant portion of the literature reaffirmed fertility as a central mechanism in the demographic transition framework, especially in studies dealing with fertility decline, reproductive intentions, and cross-country comparisons. The most common themes identified included fertility trends, family planning, reproductive behavior, and fertility intentions. These studies often adopted interdisciplinary perspectives, incorporating elements from sociology, public health, and economics to explain the timing and intensity of fertility changes across different contexts.


Most Frequent Words search: Jstor Fertility
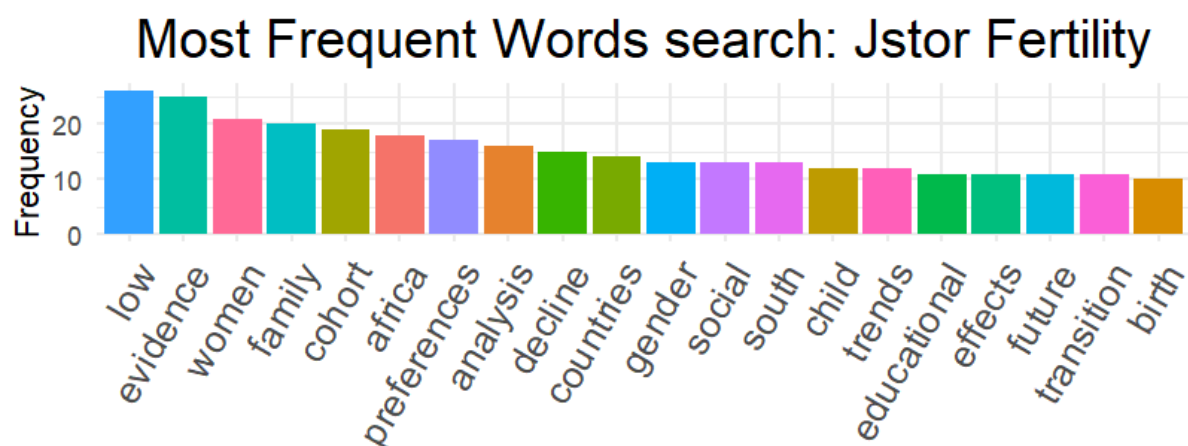
In addition to these dominant topics, the analysis also uncovered nuanced subthemes that reflect broader social concerns. For instance, several articles explored the relationship between fertility and child mortality, gender inequality, migration, and climate change. Notably, a subset of papers focused on populations described as "laggards" in the global fertility transition, raising questions about development, policy interventions, and data gaps. These results suggest that while fertility remains a core concern in demographic theory, its study is increasingly interconnected with complex social, environmental, and political dynamics.

In a self attributed subject of the paper our interpretation, we can see the big attention regarding Migration, 15 of them cited in the title the word migration and other 3 immigration and express a concern about fertility and migration. The reviewed set of articles explores the complex interplay between migration and fertility across a range of national and demographic contexts. A central theme running through many of these studies is the adaptation of immigrant fertility behavior in destination countries, particularly those with historically low fertility rates. Authors investigate how migrants adjust both the quantum (number of children) and tempo (timing of births) of childbearing in response to new social, cultural, and economic environments. Several articles also examine intergenerational differences, highlighting how fertility behaviors change across first, second, and even

third-generation immigrants.

Another important focus is the role of forced migration and displacement, which tends to disrupt reproductive patterns but may also lead to reorganization of family formation strategies over time. Studies conducted in Burundi, South Africa, and Nigeria, for instance, bring attention to how conflict, insecurity, and internal displacement shape fertility outcomes in distinct ways. Similarly, economic shocks such as the Great Recession in Italy are shown to influence fertility preferences among emigrants, raising questions about long-term demographic consequences. Despite the thematic diversity, a shared thread across the literature is the recognition that migration cannot be separated from fertility dynamics, as both are deeply embedded in broader social processes such as integration, policy, displacement, and intergenerational change.

Most Frequent subject identified: Jstor Fertility
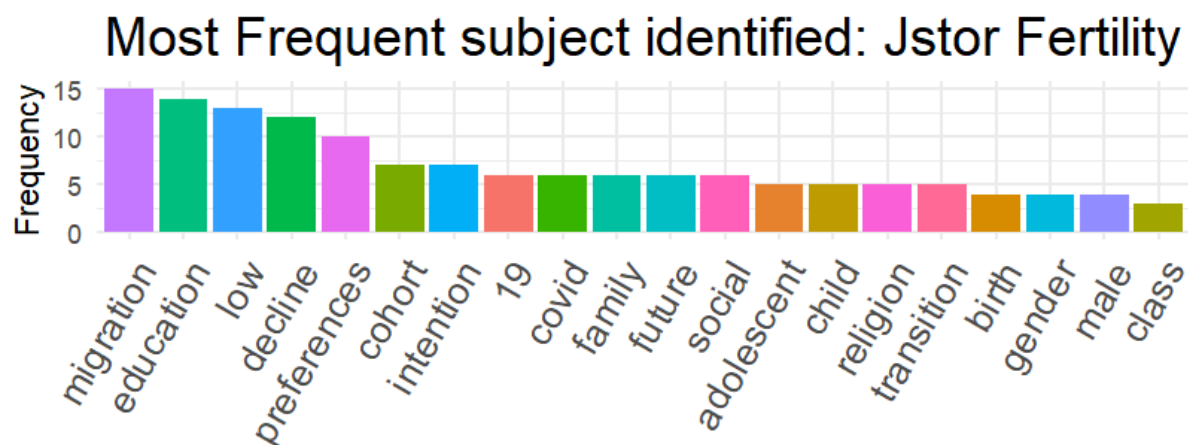


In terms of temporal distribution, the selected articles were relatively well spread across the 2020–2025 period, with a higher concentration in 2020 and 2021, possibly reflecting an increased academic interest in fertility dynamics during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Papers on Fertility by Year, JSTOR
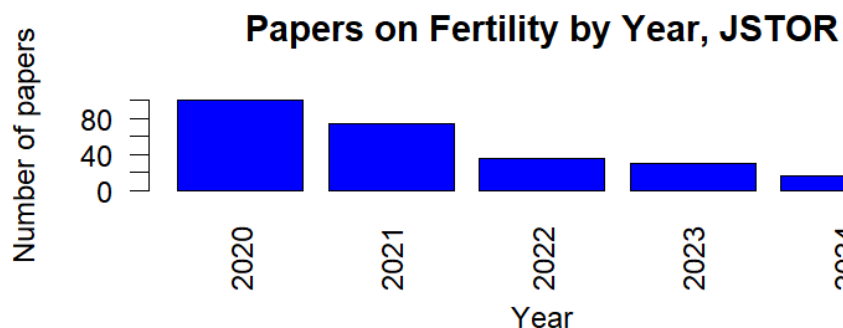
Geographically, the majority of the studies focused on European countries, with particular

attention to demographic transitions in Africa and Europe. In contrast, relatively few papers addressed fertility in Latin America, highlighting a potential gap in the global academic discourse. While some studies adopted a global or multi-country comparative lens, much of the literature remained concentrated in high-income contexts, suggesting a need for broader inclusion of diverse regional perspectives in demographic research.

Most Frequent Localization search: Jstor Fertility
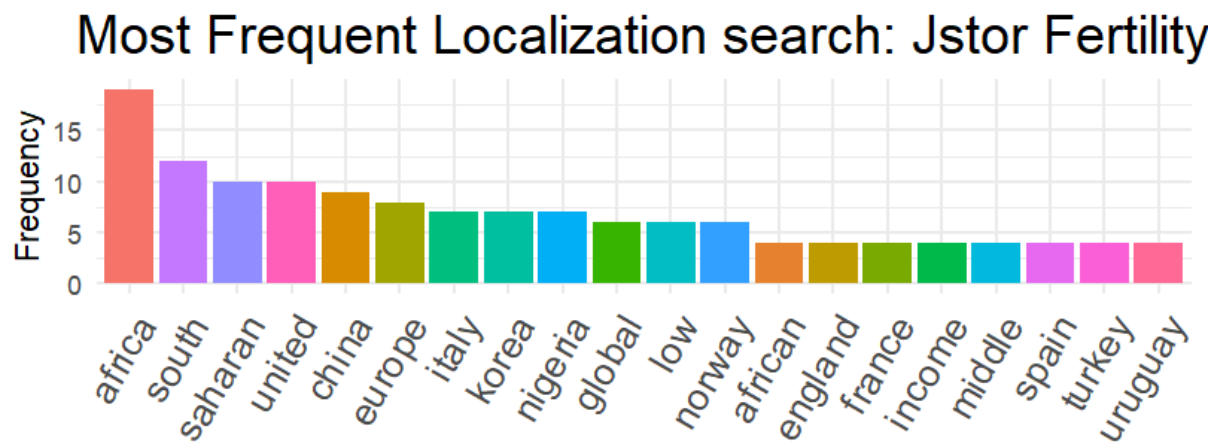
One notable absence in the reviewed literature is the connection between fertility and themes related to care and aging. Despite the clear demographic consequences of declining fertility, such as population aging and shifts in care demands, few articles addressed these interrelated dynamics. This gap suggests an important opportunity for future research to explore how lower fertility rates contribute to the restructuring of age composition and the implications this has for caregiving systems, intergenerational support, and social policy.

Demographic change, immigration and care

At the beginning of this paper, we highlighted the demographic transition as a globally relevant framework for understanding demographic change. While the model provides a near-universal lens through which to examine population dynamics, we also emphasized the considerable variation in how this transition unfolds across and within regions. Countries in Europe, East Asia, and North America are undergoing advanced stages of demographic transition, characterized by population aging and declining fertility. In contrast, other parts of the world continue to experience demographic growth, particularly due to the sustained presence of large cohorts of children, adolescents, and young adults. This was clearly illustrated by UNDESA estimates for the regions studied, broken down into four age groups, revealing significant regional disparities in the pace and structure of demographic change.

As demonstrated in recent bibliographical studies on fertility, migration has emerged as a highly pertinent theme, particularly in relation to low fertility trends in European and other high-income countries, a connection that is not new, but increasingly prominent in

demographic research. Building on the broader discussion of the global demographic transition, it is essential to recognize that rapid shifts in population structures, especially population aging in some regions and youth bulges in others, are intensifying migration patterns both within and across borders. Migration has become a key mechanism for redistributing labor, with migrants filling critical shortages in essential sectors such as health and care work, particularly in countries experiencing declining populations.

The COVID-19 pandemic made this dynamic especially visible, as many high-income countries relied heavily on migrant workers to address urgent care labor needs. These transformations in labor migration reflect not only economic and health system pressures, but also the demographic urgency brought on by uneven fertility transitions worldwide. However, while migration brings important opportunities for both sending and receiving countries, it also presents complex challenges. Many destination countries still lack adequate policies to ensure the legal status, protection, and access to basic services like healthcare and education for migrant workers, refugees, and their families.

According to Shaffer et al. (2020), the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the international migration of healthcare workers, particularly nurses, from low- and middle-income countries to high-income destinations, deepening pre-existing global inequalities. This trend underscores the structural connection between demographic aging, rising care needs in the Global North, and labor outflows from the Global South. While high-income countries increasingly depend on migrant healthcare workers to address care shortages intensified by aging populations and pandemic pressures, source countries face the depletion of already fragile health systems. The result is an exacerbation of the global care divide: a pattern where demographic transition, care labor demands, and migration flows intersect to reveal and reproduce unequal health and development conditions between the Global North and South.

Another aspect is domestic work. Handerson, J. and Joseph, R.-M. (2015) analyse the experiences of Haitian migrant women in France and Brazil, revealing how care-related labour demands intersect with processes of social and professional downward mobility in transnational migration. Based on ethnographic research and life histories, their study highlights how gender, class, race and nationality shape the trajectories of women who once held middle-class status in Haiti and employed domestic workers themselves. Upon migrating, however, they found themselves relegated to precarious domestic labour. The cases studied illustrate how migration disrupted their professional identities and imposed material and symbolic reconfigurations of their social roles. The experiences of these women expose the structural inequalities embedded in the global care economy, in which migrant women of colour often fill undervalued and invisible roles in the households of both the Global North and South. This shows how migration can simultaneously reproduce and contest intersecting oppressions within global labour markets.

From a theoretical approach Daniele Kergoat (2012) understands "care" is more than just an

attentive attitude; it involves a set of material activities and relationships aimed at providing a concrete response to the needs of others. It is both a service and a form of support and assistance, whether paid or unpaid, that carries a sense of responsibility toward the well-being of others. This redefinition of care reflects a shift in the understanding of work itself, which now encompasses activities that transform not only society and nature but also the individuals engaged in these tasks, making work a political activity in this feminist, materialist perspective. (Kergoat, 2012)

Care work is emblematic of this broader "production of living in society," yet it remains undervalued. While the recognition of care as work grants dignity to both paid and unpaid domestic labor, it does not erase the reality that much of this work is unskilled, poorly paid, and often not chosen freely, especially for women. The concept of the sexual division of labor has been key in linking paid and unpaid labor, expanding the notion of labor beyond traditional forms of value-producing work to include all forms of socially provided labor, particularly that of women and marginalized groups. (Kergoat, 2012)

The outsourcing of domestic labor, especially in the Global North and large metropolises of the Global South, further reshapes gender and ethnic relations. As women increasingly participate in the workforce and climb the corporate ladder, they rely on migrant women and local workers in precarious conditions to take over domestic duties. This dynamic creates new forms of social interaction, often reinforcing class divides, as wealthier women employ poorer, often immigrant women for domestic work. While this externalization eases tensions in middle-class households and allows women more career flexibility, it does little to advance gender equality, instead masking deeper inequalities between women themselves. (Kergoat, 2012).

To gather evidence on care, as well as paid and unpaid work, time-use surveys are a valuable tool; however, not all countries have conducted such surveys, limiting the availability of comparable data. The global distribution of time-use surveys reflects significant regional disparities in data availability on care and unpaid work. Europe stands out with the highest number of surveys (29 across 15 countries), indicating a stronger institutional commitment to measuring time allocation, particularly in the context of gender and care policies. In contrast, Latin America (8 surveys in 7 countries), Sub-Saharan Africa (10 surveys in 8 countries), and the Middle East and North Africa (10 surveys in 9 countries) show more limited coverage. Asia, while diverse, has conducted 13 surveys in 9 countries, including populous nations such as India and China. Transition countries (12 surveys in 12 nations) and high-income countries outside Europe, namely North America (14 surveys across Canada and the United States) and other developed countries like Australia, Japan, and New Zealand (6 surveys), further enrich the global dataset. However, the uneven presence of surveys underscores the need for expanded and harmonized time-use data collection, especially in the Global South, to support evidence-based policies on care, labor, and gender equity.

Table 1: Time–use surveys by region, country, and year (compiled by Jacques Charmes. 2015)

Middle East and North Africa (9 countries, 10 surveys)	Sub-Saharan Africa (8 countries, 10 surveys)	Asia (9 countries, 13 surveys)	Latin America (7 countries, 8 surveys)	Europe (15 countries, 29 surveys)	Transition (12 countries, 12 surveys)	North America (2 countries, 14 surveys)	Other developed countries (3 countries, 6 surveys)
Algeria (2012)	Benin (1998)	Armenia (2004)	Colombia (2012–13)	Austria (2008–09)	Albania (2010–2011)	Canada (2005), (2010)	Australia (2006)
Islamic Republic of Iran (2009)	Ethiopia (2013)	Cambodia (2004)	Costa Rica (2004)	Belgium (1999), (2005)	Bulgaria (2009–2010)	United States of America (2003–2014)	Japan (2001), (2006), (2011)
Iraq (2007)	Ghana (2009)	China (2008)	Ecuador (2012)	Denmark (2001)	Estonia (2009–2010)		New Zealand (1998–1999), (2009–2010)
Morocco (2011–2012)	Madagascar (2001)	India (1998–99)	El Salvador (2010)	Finland (1979), (1987), (1999), (2009)	Hungary (1999–2000)		
Oman (2007–2008)	Mali (2008)	Republic of Korea (1999), (2004), (2009)	Mexico (2002), (2009)	France (1986), (1999), (2010)	Latvia (2003)		
State of Palestine (1999–2000), (2012–2013)	Mauritius (2003)	Kyrgyzstan (2010)	Panama (2011)	Germany (2001–2002)	Lithuania (2003)		
Qatar (2012–2013)	South Africa (2000), (2010)	Mongolia (2007), (2011)	Peru (2010)	Greece (2013–2014)	Moldova (2011–2012)		
Tunisia (2005–2006)	United Republic of Tanzania (2006), (2014)	Pakistan (2007)		Ireland (2005)	Romania (2011–2012)		
		Thailand (2004), (2009)		Italy (1988–1989), (2002–2003), (2008–2009)	Serbia (2010–2011)		
		Turkey (2006)		Netherlands (2005–2006)	Slovenia (2000–2001)		
				Poland (2003–2004)	Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia		
				Portugal (1999)			

				Spain (2002–2003), (2009–2010)			
				Sweden (2000–2001), (2010–2011)			
				United Kingdom (2000)			

Final considerations

In this ongoing analysis, we propose the concept of a "demography of care" as a useful lens to understand how demographic transformations, particularly declining fertility, population aging, and evolving migration patterns, are reshaping care needs and labor dynamics, especially from a gendered and Global South perspective. Preliminary reflections suggest that in many regions of the Global South, care responsibilities, often unpaid or poorly remunerated, continue to fall predominantly on women, reinforcing structural gender inequalities. These demographic shifts appear to intensify demands for care, both within households and across public systems, while simultaneously influencing the mobility of care labor, as women from low-income countries increasingly migrate to provide care in higher-income contexts.

From a gender perspective, these emerging patterns further reveal the unequal distribution of unpaid care work and its persistent undervaluation. The framework of a "demography of care" invites deeper exploration into how demographic and care regimes interact, and points to the need for policy responses that promote more equitable sharing of care responsibilities. As this research progresses, it becomes clear that strengthening social protection systems and recognizing the social and economic value of care, particularly in countries undergoing rapid demographic transitions, will be central to advancing gender equality and social justice in the context of global demographic change.

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