

T-AP Recovery, Renewal and Resilience in a Post-Pandemic World (RRR)

Final Report

Project Information	
Project Title	En Route to Recovery: Diversity and vulnerability in care work during and after the COVID-19 pandemic
Start Date	1.3.2022
End Date	31.8.2024
Lead PI and Institution	Professor Marjut Jyrkinen, University of Helsinki, Finland
Consortium Members and Institutions	<p>Team Finland Lead PI Professor Marjut Jyrkinen, University of Helsinki Dr, Professor Adjunct, Jukka Lehtonen, University of Helsinki MA Liina Lohikoski, University of Helsinki Dr, University Lecturer Tytti Suominen (previous surname Steel), University of Turku, and Professor Adjunct of University of Helsinki</p> <p>Team Canada PI, Dr, Professor Kathy Sanderson, Lakehead University MSc Ryan Hron, Lakehead University</p> <p>Team South Africa PI Professor Floretta Boonzaier, Professor, Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town Dr, Senior Lecturer Mandisa Malinga, Department of Psychology, University of Cape Town Dr, Lecturer Carmine Rustin, Department of Women’s and Gender Studies, University of the Western Cape</p> <p>Team UK PI Professor Linda McKie, Kings’ College London Dr Caitlin Bawn, King’s College London Professor Sophie Bowlby, King’s College London Research administration manager Dilesh Shah</p>
Project URL	

1. Project Summary (max 700 words)

A summary drawing out the key points and messages (what has been achieved and what did not go according to plan and why).

Our Project examined the experiences of paid care workers in four countries – Canada, Finland, South Africa and the United Kingdom– during and after the COVID-

19 pandemic. Whilst care work is often praised as morally admirable, in these countries - and many others - it remains low-paid, low status, and with poor working conditions. We used mainly qualitative methods to conduct case studies of the everyday lives and experiences of paid care workers, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. As burgeoning global demand exceeds the supply of paid care workers, we leveraged the insights from these studies to learn how to improve their working lives and enhance policy thinking and decisions.

Paid care work is highly diverse in terms of the types of care given, the people cared for and the type of spaces in which care is provided. We have thus produced four case studies of the working lives of particular groups of paid care workers in different socio-economic, political and cultural contexts in these four countries. We analysed this data paying attention to the intersecting differences of gender, age, sexualities, localities, 'race'/ethnicity and economic and social positions.

2. Key findings

Project's research findings and outputs/outcomes

Throughout Canada, Finland, South Africa, and the United Kingdom, the paradox of praising care work while perpetuating low wages has been illuminated. By delving into the nuanced narratives of selected care workers and employing qualitative research methods, we have highlighted the multifaceted dimensions of their lives during the pandemic and into the post-pandemic era. This exploration underscores the urgent need for systemic reforms to address the persistent inequalities and challenges faced by this essential workforce.

The examination of economic and social disparities between care workers revealed both distinct challenges and commonalities. Despite unique contextual factors, issues such as low wages, job insecurity, predominantly female representation, and the demanding nature of care work have emerged as shared concerns. Moreover, the moral demands placed upon care workers, particularly highlighted during the pandemic, are undermined by the lack of societal recognition of their indispensable role. Additionally, while public commitments to enhancing the rights of women, racially stigmatised groups and sexual and gender minorities (LGBTI+) are evident across these nations, significant hurdles persist in achieving true equality in these spheres. As this study concludes, it calls for concerted efforts to address these intersecting challenges and uphold the dignity and rights of care workers worldwide. The vulnerabilities of care workers are frequently described in relation to the physical, emotional, and financial realities: stressful jobs that require hard work, often overworking but do not necessarily provide a living wage. The precarities inherent in care work result in high rates of turnover, staffing shortages, and stressful work environments, all of which impact those who require care, but more so, those who provide care. We found out that:

- there is a negative relationship between the value of care work and its evaluation in societies – care workers' voices are not heard

- unionisation is important for many care workers to make changes in legislation, establishing and knowing their rights
- there is a lack of recognition of care workers' contributions to the local and global economy
- despite legal protection, homo/transphobic and racist attitudes are prevalent; there are subtle and indirect discriminations as well as direct forms of discrimination

2.1. How did you go about in achieving your research findings and outputs/outcomes?

Our collaboration across the four countries has allowed us to explore the significance of national and local contexts in relation to paid care work. One differing and important feature of the four countries is the extent and type of in-migration of care workers. Other important differences include the type of welfare provision – both the financial levels of support and the role of the state and other institutions in regulating and financing care, - and the general standard of living. These differences formed the country *contexts* across which we studied how the different types of care work we studied were organised in terms of: levels of state involvement; training; social status; pay rates, working conditions; career structures and opportunities.

With this contextual background we used a variety of qualitative methods to listen to the accounts that social care workers and other stakeholders gave us about their *experiences* of care work during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. These methods included: semi-structured interviews; focus groups; photovoice methods; sound-sourcing; online interviews; and surveys (see Bowlby et al 2025 referenced in Section 3 of this report).

We showed substantial similarities between the experiences of care workers of differing types in these contrasting socio-economic and geopolitical environments. In all four countries the care workforce: is strongly feminised; it is low paid; of low social status; has poor career progression opportunities; faces problems of recruitment and retention; and includes experiences racial discrimination. Despite these difficult contexts, care workers' show strong commitment to caring for their clients.

Differences in the funding received in each country were reflected in the teams of researchers and the length of time their employment – e.g. undergraduate students, graduate students, post-doctoral researchers of different levels of seniority and full-time, part-time or temporary employment.

Two in-person meetings between all team members in Finland were vital for establishing rapport and understanding across all teams and for planning each team's research and drawing together our findings. These in-person meetings were complemented by regular online meetings at which each team's progress could be reported and findings discussed. In turn, these meeting gave rise to or were stimulated by, for example, written proposals or descriptions of work planned or undertaken.

	<p>During the writing of our joint book drafts chapters were circulated and we ensured each team’s written work was reviewed by at least one member of a different country team.</p>
	<p>2.2. Assess the Trans-Atlantic Partnership (what worked and didn’t work well? What has been achieved through this joint funding that would not have been possible within a national funding framework? Do partners have plans to continue the cooperation?)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● This funding should be marketed better in our universities. ● The funding period was too short, as it takes time to collect data; also to organise the trans-national partnership requires some time ● This opportunity to work in a trans-Atlantic, international way has been an enormous strength for our research. It has been important to see the similarities in care work in each country, but also to identify similar ways of improving the job satisfaction, recruitment and retention of care workers. For example, through: improving public awareness of and recognition of the value of care work/ers; improving their recognition as skilled professionals through skills training and development; suggesting amendments to legislation and regulation to support care workers, and enabling the voices of care workers to be heard more widely, for example through unionisation, and involving them in policy-making alongside other stakeholders and the individual firm, local and national levels ● It would be good for the joint funding programme to consider questions of equity in the funding across the varying country contexts – despite working through the different national research bodies. Inequitable funding across collaborating partners means that some teams are able to employ more staff on their projects and allows for greater participation in varying activities of the full team. Those country members whose funding did not necessarily match were unable to participate all activities, which for example, included a final project closing meeting in 2025. These questions about equitable funding are especially important when collaboration includes North-South partnerships.
	<p>3. Impact of the Project</p>
	<p>Academic impact of your project (please provide a summary of the academic impact achieved. For example, conceptual impact (changes in the way researchers understand a particular field); new methods, techniques or classification systems; or training or capacity building within academia). If possible, please list the sources (publications, reports, reviews, web links, users/beneficiaries etc.) to corroborate the impact.</p>

A. The Project produced new qualitative comparative understandings of paid care work based on their research. These are summarised in a recently published book.

The book is published as a 'Policy Press Short (Research)', a series aimed at practitioners, as well as students and researchers. The research is unusual in being a *qualitative* comparative study of paid care workers in four different countries. Most comparative research concerning care workers is quantitative. This approach has the merit of highlighting the heterogeneity of care work alongside the strong similarities across very different countries in their low social status, poor pay and very high proportion of women workers.

The book is included in the next years' Curriculum at the University of Helsinki.

Bowlby, S., Jyrkinen, M., Malinga, M. & Sanderson, K. (Eds.) (2025) *Vulnerabilities in Paid Care Work. Transnational Experiences, Insights and Voices*, Bristol: Policy Press. (Members of each team)

The book brings together selected, significant findings of each team in six chapters:

Chapter 1: Jyrkinen, M., Bowlby, S., Malinga, M. & Hron, R. *Care and vulnerabilities: Ideas, concepts and methods*. (Members of each team)

Chapter 2: Bawn, C., Bowlby, S., McKie, L. & Shah, D. *Valuing caring; Domiciliary care work in England's 'care crisis' during and post Covid* (UK Team)

Chapter 3: Rustin, C., Boonzaier, F. & Malinga, M. *Gender, migration and its intersections: domestic workers' stories of care*. (South African Team)

Chapter 4. Sanderson, S. & Hron, R. *Understanding the Long-Term Retention of Personal Support Workers in Canadian Home and Long-Term Care*. (Canadian Team)

Chapter 5. Suominen, T., Lehtonen, J., Jyrkinen, M. & Liina Lohikoski, L. *Vulnerabilities in care work: perspectives of migrant and LGBT care workers* (Finnish Team)

Chapter 6. *Reconceptualizing precarity and agency: New ways forward* Sanderson, K., Bawn, C., Boonzaier, F. & Lehtonen, J. (Members of each team)

B. In addition to the book, we have academic articles published, in press or in preparation concerning new findings or conceptual understandings and new techniques

Bawn C, Bowlby S & McKie, L "“Little things go a long way”": the influence of leadership culture and recognition for retention and professionalisation of domiciliary care' – in preparation for submission to *Work, Employment & Society*

Bawn C & Sanderson K 'Valuing the 'time-space' of marginalised populations: reflections on the Photo-Sound-Voice methodology' – in preparation for submission to *Qualitative Sociology*

Bawn C and Khatun T "'Humans, not heroes": abandoned domiciliary care workers since Covid-19' – in preparation for submission as a *Lancet Commentary*

Bawn C and Sanderson K 'Utilising Sound-Sourcing (audio-diaries) for inclusive research: a 'how-to' guide' – in preparation for submission to *Qualitative Sociology*

Bawn C, McKie L and Bowlby S, *Generating and assessing ideas: A report on the More Time workshop*, in preparation.

Boonzaier, F., Malinga, M., & Rustin, C. (2023) "We Lost a Lot During COVID": Migrant Women's Reflections on Precarity, Work and COVID-19 in Cape Town, South Africa. *Social and Health Sciences*, 10 pages . <https://doi.org/10.25159/2957-3645/13202>

Boonzaier, F., Peters, S., Katsere, I. (2025) Narrating Intersectionality: Migrant HIV positive women's narratives of living and surviving in South Africa during the COVID-19 pandemic. In S. Camporesi, S. Mulubale & M. Davis (Eds.) *Crisis, Inequity and Legacy: Narrative Analyses of the COVID-19 Pandemic*. Oxford University Press.

Kiviruusu, O., Ranta, K., Lindgren, M., Haravuori, H., Silén, Y., Therman, S., Lehtonen, J., Sares-Jäske, L., Aalto-Setälä, T., Marttunen, M. & Suvisaari, J. (2024) Mental health after the COVID-19 pandemic among Finnish youth: a repeated, cross-sectional, population-based study, *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 11(6), 451-460.

Sanderson, K., Hron, R., & Morrill, C. Beyond Transcription: Audio and Textual Analysis of Care Worker Stories During COVID-19 in preparation for *Journal of Business Research*.

Sares-Jäske, L., Czimbalmos, M., Majlander, S., Siukola, R., Klemetti, R., Luopa, P. & Lehtonen, J., (2023) Gendered Differences in Experiences of Bullying and Mental Health Among Transgender and Cisgender Youth, *Journal of Youth and Adolescence*. 52, 1531–1548.

Suominen, T. et al. Blurred boundaries of care work: Working life experiences of practical nurses with migrant background in Helsinki Metropolitan area; in review in *Ethnologia Scandinica*.

Suominen, T. et al. Manikyyrejä ja manipulaatiota: Hyvinvointitalouden kulttuurisia merkityksiä hoivatyössä [Manicures and manipulations: meanings of welfare economy in care work]; a book chapter in the book by Ethnos (<https://ethnosry.org/mita-on-etnologia/>)

C. New methods and techniques:

Sound-Sourcing (audio-diaries) (Bawn and Sanderson forthcoming). The UK and Canadian teams piloted the ‘Sound-Sourcing’ method: selected care workers used smartphones to send researchers short audio diary recordings and/or pictures reflecting their experiences over a two month period. We showed that the method yields insights into the immediate emotional and practical experiences of individual care workers over time and place that are not captured using other qualitative methods. The experience with this method has enabled its improved use in a research project developed out of the T-AP by Bawn (UK team) and Sanderson (Canadian team) and funded by the British Academy.

New approaches to survey analysis were used with current survey data by Lehtonen to analyse LGBTIQ workers’ situations and experience, emphasising the intersectionality of gendered social positions, exploring data on how non-heterosexual and non-binary carers were treated in care organizations. During the Covid-19 pandemic, discrimination on these bases in social care organisations was reduced as the crisis brought people together. However, the embedded discrimination frequently re-surfaced in the workplace once the crisis was over.

New creative methodologies were explored by the South African team. The work on this project centred the use of photography through photovoice – allowing participants to capture their experiences in more emotive and visually appealing ways. Emerging from this the SA team worked with the concept of ‘dehumanisation’ which was ever present in their data with migrant care workers. They collaborated with a professional photographer to capture portraits of migrant workers alongside their narratives about their lives and their work to counter the theme of dehumanisation. The analysis of this data is ongoing.

E. New Grant: Sanderson & Bawn from the Canadian and British teams have a British Academy grant (KF8\230185) to explore similar issues with low paid female workers in rural areas that includes care workers and other sectors.

F. New Application: The Finnish team has submitted a proposal DEMOYOTH that partly applies the current data and will collaborate with ER2R researchers if the funding application is successful.

3.1. Impacts outside academia (please outline the main changes your project has brought about for people outside academia).

- **We offer suggestions to improve care workers’ wellbeing in our book which are directed at stakeholders in the social care sector:**
 - Support for care workers to have greater input into their workplaces and for them to unionize
 - Long term efforts to change societal understanding of and valuation of care work
 - Raising care workers’ pay to reflect its real social value
 - Offering new ways of improving retention at low or no low cost to employers through improved management, i.e. support with wellbeing and

mental health, financial and non-financial incentives, co-designing of interventions with staff, and management recognition of jobs well done

- **The UK team gained two Impact Grants from Kings College in conjunction with the project Healthier Working Lives for Care Workers (led by Professor McKie):**
 - **Care Stories:** We completed a close secondary analysis of qualitative and ethnographic data, and worked with a graphic designer to develop an illustrated briefing paper and summary postcard/flyer from our findings – all disseminated online among relevant organisations. This work summarises how managers can improve retention and encourage care workers to participate in designing improved working practices. See <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/overview-of-care-stories> for an Impact Summary blog post or <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/qhsm/assets/care-stories-policy-briefing-paper.pdf> for the full briefing paper.
 - **More Time for Quality Care:** We led a cross-sectoral workshop on 28th March 2025, with a select group of care managers, policy makers and practitioners/stakeholders, we presented our findings and debated ways of making innovations in care work to give care workers ‘more time for quality care giving’.
- **The South African team mounted a photovoice exhibition of the photos taken by their interviewees** to raise awareness of domestic workers’ everyday lives. They also worked in collaboration with a domestic workers’ union offering an opportunity to gain visibility for the union. The exhibition posters have been professionally designed and printed and retained by the union for future awareness-raising activities.
- The South African team undertook further data collection with migrant women seeking casual employment on the side of the road. Professional portraits were taken of the women and these were printed for them.

3.2. Any expected future impact of your project

- In all four countries, the discussion on care is ongoing. Participation in the public debate will offer the possibility to suggest new solutions based on our research.
- In academic teaching and publishing, it is important to bring racism and discrimination on the basis of LGBTIQ more to the fore. For instance, University of Helsinki Gender Studies now is referencing more literature related to and focusing on decolonial thinking instead of white feminism in teaching and research. It also aims to enhance the connection with indigenous studies and crip studies. Our studies of LGBTIQ+ discrimination are contributing to this shift at the University of Helsinki.

- Collaboration between the Universities of the four countries has been enhanced and the data that we have gathered, will enable more international collaboration between the teams working on this grant.

4. Project Team

Did the grant support the professional development of team members? If so, how?

Overall team members gained valuable insights into the socio-political contexts in the other teams' countries and greater understanding of the theoretical and practical concerns of researchers from the other participating countries. We hope to leverage this understanding in the development of future grants. Two members of the consortium have already done so (See below)

- CAN: research assistant got a Masters Degree
- FIN: research assistant got a Masters Degree
- FIN: one of our researchers got a position as a university lecturer in another university in Finland
- UK: research project manager got a more permanent job in another university
- UK & Canada: the main UK post-doctoral researcher and the main Canadian research leader gained a 2-year British Academy grant
- SA: Two research assistants were awarded their Honours Degrees. The project managed to support one research assistant currently doing a Masters Degree in Psychology.
- SA: One member of the SA team contributed as Editor to the book project which will ultimately benefit their publication portfolio toward promotion

4.1. As a result of the research, have any team members obtained any prizes, awards or commendations? (Please only include information that is available in the public domain).

As a result of her overall publication profile, which includes this research, Floretta Boonzaier received a B2 rating from the South African National Research Foundation which indicates that she is "a researcher who enjoys considerable international recognition (from her) peers for the high quality and impact of (her) recent research outputs."

4.2. Did the project lead to any additional and or unexpected collaborations outside of the research team? If so, please provide details.

- The South African team collaborated with the South African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union.
- The South African team facilitated two presentations by Mosaic, a Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) that focusses on combatting abuse and domestic violence, for the South African Domestic Services and Allied Workers Union.
- We have extended our research network to include German and Dutch researchers and will explore further research on care worker retention and AI/digitisation innovations with them at an in-person workshop (June 2025).
- On the basis of the Final TAP conference in May 2025, new collaboration with another project *Who Cares? Rebuilding care in post-pandemic world* will take place through collaboration in series of webinars in autumn 2025. This opens up a possibility to develop further collaboration.

5. Conclusions (please provide a brief summary with the main positive and negative issues concerning your project).

Positive:

- Excellent possibility to collaborate with talented and committed researchers from three continents and four countries. The seeds of this initial collaboration is likely to grow and continue to be fruitful in the coming years
- New openings to address existing data again, in particular to re-analyse data from gender and intersectionality perspectives
- There are questions and areas of interest that have emerged from the existing collaboration that will likely be explored through future research and collaborations as funding possibilities allow

Negative:

- Inequality between the partners' funding
- Too short a time to do all the desired research on these very important topics and use the data carefully

6. Recommendations for the Trans-Atlantic Platform

- Difficulty as some countries' funding is not sufficient to pay for the necessary research
- Inequality and post-colonial relations seem to be embedded in the funding structure
- Perhaps change the system so that all the partners in accepted applications have a minimum sum to fund research for the Majority world colleagues?
- Great opportunity to learn from each other and to do multidisciplinary research!
- Life of the project should be extended as the short timeframe doesn't allow for the research to be fully elaborated, for the data to be fully analysed and for all publications possible to emerge from the work
- Perhaps there could be more time for presenting the projects in the mid and end conferences – it might be good to divide the projects into groups where similar topics are discussed
- Many anti-gender and related movements are raising in many parts of the globe, and therefore it is important that these should not impact on this funding instrument