The Gendered Pandemic: The Ethics of Caring (Too Much)

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Abstract

Exploring the intersectional experiences of women during the coronavirus pandemic, this article utilizes the *Viral Imaginations: COVID-19* creative archive to portray the diverse, lived realities experienced by women. Drawing on feminist ethics of care, this article investigates how women within the domestic and professional realms pivoted to meet unexpected challenges. As women acceded to the "honorable feminine" stereotype and principle of self-sacrifice during the pandemic, women's overall well-being and economic realities declined precipitously, and society lost critical perspectives. Visual artworks and creative writing narratives in *Viral Imaginations* provide documentation of, provoke empathy for, and create an understanding of the gendered imbalances of care work. Taking the form of women's invisible, unacknowledged, and expected labor of care and nurturing, these inequities demand a societal reevaluation..

Keywords: pandemic, narratives, women, art, invisible labor, care ethics

Figure 1. Julie Ammon (2020) used acrylics, watercolors, and pen to create a 11"x15" painting she titled, *2020 pt. 2.* Her painting, a submission to the *Viral Imaginations* repository of art about visceral impact and everyday life during the covid pandemic, highlights her experiences in remote learning environments in her senior year of high school. Julie Ammon's artwork focuses on the theme of concealment, mirroring the "cameras off" mode she and her classmates adopted during online courses and meeting.

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic gave rise to another crisis—a "crisis of care," targeting women, their lives, and their livelihoods (New York City Comptroller, 2021, para. 1). Despite continuous strides in the realms of women's paid labor and economic independence, "the coronavirus *has* been a disaster for feminism" (Lewis, 2021, para. 18). The pandemic derailed hard-won progress as women lost jobs due to economic exigencies and left the workforce to become primary caregivers following childcare and school closures.

Reducing external work obligations at a rate five times that of men, women assumed the bulk of extra caretaking and household responsibilities, complying with unspoken gendered norms (Kashen et al., 2020). For example, mothers with young children cut back their employment hours or left jobs altogether (Kashen et al., 2020). In addition, shifting work to remote platforms, such as Zoom (see Figure 1), increased pressures on and anxieties of women, who already endure greater appearance-based judgment than men (Winukur Munk, 2020). With colleagues peering into their private lives, online work environments frustrated women. Home-based distractions encroached into the business realm, making it nearly impossible to maintain professional, engaged appearances (Lewis, 2021; Winukur Munk, 2020).

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than one million women left the labor force during the pandemic (as cited in Youn, 2021). These women were disproportionately women of color, as jobs predominantly held by women evaporated and support systems, such as daycares, schools, and nursing facilities, shuttered (Youn, 2021). This compound phenomenon is not simply the province of statistics. Rather, it embodies the experiences of women as workers and caregivers—experiences captured by the *Viral Imaginations* project via the creative expressions of Pennsylvanian women. These detailed, artistic narratives by those who shared their voices through submissions to the archival gallery aid current and future scholars in understanding the lives of women living during pandemic times in professional and personal caregiving roles.[1]

Methodology

This article explores the *Viral Imaginations* project, an archive of visual art and creative writing produced by Pennsylvanians during COVID-19. We[2] employed a narrative ethics framework[3] and a feminist ethics of care approach to our analysis of the experiences presented by and about women and their pandemic-impacted lives. Currently housed online in the Pattee Special Collections at The Pennsylvania State University (Penn State), the *Viral Imaginations* archive preserves individuals' narratives conveyed through visual arts and creative writing. Scholars can utilize this publicly accessible archive of visual imagery and text to extrapolate and humanize statistical findings related to women, employment, and affective labor[4] during the recent pandemic.

Positing care as an ethical obligation ingrained within lived realities in which interpersonal relationships are central, feminist care ethics assess the moral duties customarily owed based on cultural, traditional, or contractual affiliations (Green, 2012). A unique philosophical approach, feminist care ethics normatively elevates interconnected positionalities and their associated social and emotional constructs of care—challenging theoretical principles of autonomy, independence, and power (Green, 2012). This shifted perspective guides ethical behaviors according to roles and rationales based on caring (Green, 2012). As such, feminist

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[1] For the purpose of this article, women are defined as all individuals that identify as women, including both cisgender and transgender females.

[2] The authors, Michele Mekel and Lauren Stetz, live in Pennsylvania and did so during the pandemic. Both are white, American women who identify as cisgender and heterosexual. In addition, Mekel and Stetz each have earned a terminal degree in their respective field of study.

Mekel, an educator employed by Penn State and co-PI of the *Viral Imaginations* project, is single and child-free by choice. She is in her 50s and a first-generation American (United States) of European decent.

Stetz, also an educator and former graduate research assistant on the *Viral Imaginations* project, is the mother of an elementary school aged Pakistani American (United States) child whom she homeschooled during the COVID-19 pandemic. She is in her 30s.

[3] Narrative ethics investigates the nexus between storytelling and norms (see, e.g., Phelan, 2014).

[4] Affective labor is work designed to influence emotional responses within human relationships and serves as an intangible commodity (see, e.g., Oksala, 2015). Relying on emotional and social acumen, this form of production is typically carried out in kinship and community groups by women without remuneration (see, e.g., Oksala, 2015).

care ethics is more inclusive and realistic than other philosophical approaches to ethics (Green, 2012).

The authors reviewed the entire *Viral Imaginations* archive, consisting of more than 300 works of visual art and creative writing, to identify submissions reflecting a feminist ethics of care perspective through visual art, creative writing, and/or artist statements. For example, the authors included submissions that overtly depicted woman-presenting individuals in caring roles, such as nurses and mothers, as well as submissions with narratives that discussed how the visual art or creative writing reflect women in caring roles. The research question addressed was: How did Pennsylvanian women who contributed art and creative writing to the *Viral Imaginations* archive perceive the pandemic in relation to care work?

Figure 2. Prescription Playground by Amanda Ritter (2021), [digital photo manipulated in Photoshop], (3" x 11," 300 DPI). In *Prescription Playground*, Amanda Ritter recreates her experience of motherhood during the COVID-19 pandemic through the juxtaposition of pill bottles over a playground. Included courtesy of Amanda Ritter.

The Pandemic's Impact on Women in Employment and Caregiving Roles Evident in Art Created During the Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic severely undermined strides toward employment parity, deepening extant gendered inequalities (Yavorsky et al., 2021). With workforce disruptions due to lockdowns and COVID precautions, many businesses closed or limited operations; as a result, women in the United States endured employment declines of nearly 18% between January and April of 2020, compared to roughly 14% of men who experienced employment losses during the same period (Donavan & Labonte, 2020). Researchers attributed women's employment losses to two factors: (a) the concentration of jobs held by women in businesses that closed, and (b) responsibility for caregiving (Donavan & Labonte, 2020). Many women took on the role of primary caretaker due to school closures, loss of childcare, and the need to aid family members who were ill, elderly, and/or disabled. As part of the "sandwich generation," middle-aged women often faced a simultaneous increase in demands from both older and younger kin.

Unfortunately, these occurrences were predictable. For example, scholars of epidemic history forecast that k-12 school closures would compel parents to leave jobs, with mothers assuming homeschooling duties (Lewis, 2021). Moreover, women are more likely than men to be single parents (Lewis, 2021). Even within the context of domestic partnerships, women in the U.S. typically earn less than their male counterparts (Lewis, 2021). In addition to the economic pragmatism of preserving the income of the higher earner, gendered cultural ideologies dominant in the U.S. discounted many of the jobs that women held (Lewis, 2021). As a result, the pandemic forced families back in time, reviving "the breadwinner/homemaker divide" (Lewis, 2021, para. 4). Thus, women in heterosexual-appearing relationships found themselves performing 40% more childcare and taking on a larger share of household duties than their male partners (Alon et al., 2020). As a result, mothers who maintained employment experienced decreased professional productivity and reduced work hours (Liss, 2021). Moreover, these imbalances led to relationship dissatisfaction and gave rise to "feelings of emptiness, and experiences of parenting overload" (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019, p. 457). In the U.S., while approximately 32% of fathers reported lower mental health during the pandemic, 57% of mothers complained of emotional declines (Power, 2019, p. 68).

Revealing the burdens of pandemic caregiving responsibilities, submissions to *Viral Imaginations* portrayed women as devoted mothers and aides to the ill. Women without formal medical training frequently filled the role of "pandemic caretaker"—complying with an unspoken social contract predetermined by gender. Quarantining sick relatives in bedrooms, women assumed a high risk of illness by caring for those who could not care for themselves. A similar gendered "default" typically applied to pandemic childcare within heterosexual-presenting relationships, in which women accepted extensive "mothering" duties often without question or acknowledgement. Despite having made remarkable strides in gender equity in the U.S., such as surpassing men in admission to institutions of higher education, "in their homes, women are still fitting into stereotypical roles of doing the bulk of cooking, cleaning and parenting" (Gogoi, 2020, para. 6). Within the *Viral Imaginations* archive, artistic works emphasize women's invisible labor, including supporting mental and emotional health, maintaining schedules and routines, and providing continuous household upkeep—amid a bevy of countless other unacknowledged tasks (Ciciolla & Luthar, 2019).

Some works celebrated these care duties. "Love in the Time of COVID-19" by Kathleen Morrow (2021) illustrates the joys of extended engagement with one's children from the safety of home during the coronavirus crisis. Morrow (2020) notes in the description submitted to *Viral Imaginations* with her artwork: "At home, we play in the calmest part of the hurricane. / Outside, they are running on the banks and hoarding toilet paper." But not all submitters viewed the nonconsensual, sudden assignment of additional care work as charitably. Carol Allison's "Quarantine" (2021) offers an honest view of competing and compounding stressors experienced by a mother sheltering in place with children and a spouse, while working from home to financially support the family. Allison's (2021) piece identifies specific frustrations:

> I become irritable after hours of computer time. I am constantly interrupted and have to remind everyone that I am actually working. No one is picking up after themselves. I respond curtly to their questions "Are the dishes in the dishwasher dirty or clean?"
>
> "Whose clothes are in the dryer?"

"Has anyone seen my keys?"
"What is today's date?"

Some contributors focused on affective labor's emotional toll. Familial matriarch Margaret Duda (2021) illuminates worry's impact in "A Family of Doctors Treating Covid," noting: "I wait and hear about millions infected, thousands dying, and worry, / worry about my children working through a pandemic to save lives" (Duda, 2021, para. 1). Similarly, Amanda Ritter laments the isolation of pandemic motherhood in her digitally manipulated photograph, juxtaposing prescription bottles with the image of a park where she was often alone with her son while he played (see Figure 2).

Predominantly female healthcare workers also endured pandemic-created hardships (Liss, 2021). On the frontlines, nurses—87% of whom are female—lacked needed resources, including sufficient co-worker support and appropriate personal protective equipment (PPE) (Liss, 2021). Examining the plight of female healthcare workers, Lynn Kibbe's (2020) "Angels Among Us" evokes an otherworldly, haunting quality through a detailed scratchboard (see Figure 3). Depicting a care worker as an angel, Kibbe (2020) reveals the "exhaustion and frustration" experienced by women working in care roles (para.1). Kibbe's artist statement explains that the woman's expression divulges disappointment with antimasking campaigns because, as a care laborer, she is subject to extraordinarily long and taxing shifts during the COVID pandemic.
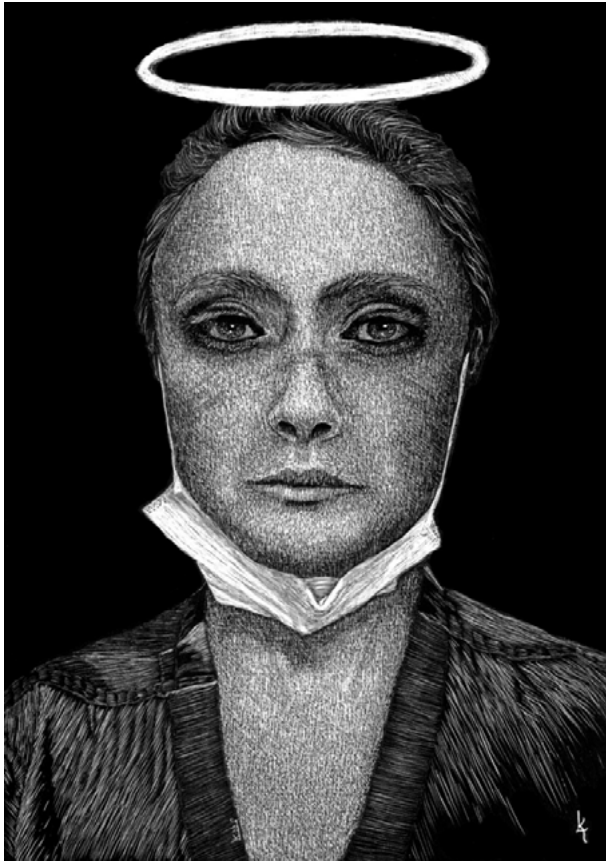
Figure 3. *Angels Among Us* by Lynn Kibbe, [scratchboard], (7" x 5"). In *Angels Among Us*, Lynn Kibbe portrays the exhaustion and frustration of a care worker after endless night shifts during the COVID-19 pandemic. Included courtesy of Lynn Kibbe.

Comparing nurses to superheroes, Stella Talamo (2020) honors nurses' sacrifices in "Not All Heroes Wear Capes" (see Figure 4). In her acrylic painting, Talamo renders a female nurse wearing green scrubs among a lineup of male comic-book heroes, such as Batman and Spiderman. Describing her painting, Talamo (2020) writes:

[Healthcare workers] have put taking care of patients and these patients' health above their own well-being. This is similar to how

heroes put their own lives at risk for the greater good and to help save lives. Due to COVID-19 healthcare workers have sacrificed their time, put their own lives at risk, and some have also had to limit their time with loved ones to prevent possible transmission of the virus. (para. 1)

Figure 4. *Not All Heroes Wear Capes* by Stella Talamo, [acrylic painting], (12" x 16"). In *Not All Heroes Wear Capes*, Stella Talamo highlights the self-sacrifice of healthcare workers during the pandemic as they risked their lives for those in need. Included courtesy of Stella Talamo.

Similarly, those employed in teaching, another female-dominated profession, were caught in the middle. They conducted classes from home while their own children were simultaneously engaged in remote learning (Mason, 2021). And, as with healthcare workers, the professional obligations of care that form an integral part of educators' professional identities led to mental and emotional exhaustion (Jones & Kessler, 2020). For instance, Kathleen Murphey's

(2020) "Too Much to Ask of Us" depicts a detailed conversation between two female educators grappling with how to protect students, colleagues, and the public from coronavirus exposures associated with children returning to the classroom for hybrid-mode instruction, despite a lack of protective gear and sanitation supplies.

Viral Imaginations: An Archive of Life in Pandemic Times

Launched during the April 2020 shelter-in-place phase of the pandemic by an interdisciplinary group of Penn State faculty and staff,[5] the *Viral Imaginations: COVID-19* project established a real-time, publicly accessible archive of creative writing and visual art by current and former Pennsylvanians. Submissions to the web-based project captured the experiences of living in pandemic times. Undergraduate interns from across Penn State's campuses and colleges curated works submitted by individuals with a broadly shared positional locus (i.e., Pennsylvania) but diverse intersectionalities regarding age, gender, race, orientation, nationality, language, and socio-economic status—among other characteristics.

These submissions of visual art and creative writing, along with their accompanying artist statements, are sources of data for our study of manifestations of feminist ethics of care in the *Viral Imaginations* submissions. To date, research using the archive has included data visualization[6] and textual analysis, including hybrid methodologies, such as the use of word clouds[7] (e.g., Viral Imaginations: COVID-19 Exhibition, 2021). One submission is artistic data visualization in the use of numerous photographs of nurses assembled into the portrait of a nurse (see Figure 5). From a feminist ethics of care lens of analysis, the mosaic suggests the

collective interconnectedness necessary to care for societal well-being.

Figure 5. Mosaic of Bravery and Heroism by Jason Plotkin (2020), [photo collage]. In the *Mosaic of Bravery and Heroism*, Jason Plotkin collaged 81 photos of nurses across the Penn State Health system who care for COVID-19 patients to comprise an image of a COVID-19 unit nurse in Hershey, Pennsylvania. Included courtesy of Jason Plotkin.

Sheltering in the Arts: Creative Expression to Self-Soothe and Enhance Empathy

During the pandemic, the arts and the humanities played a significant role in enabling people to express, cope with, understand, and find meaning in life amid chaos, uncertainty, and fear. Creative expression also helped instill empathy and compassion for others at a time of heightened divides. Such benefits of making and contemplating creative works were integral to *Viral Imaginations*, as the project allowed Pennsylvanians to *shelter in the arts*.

[5.] Involved institutional partners included the Art Education Program, the Bioethics Program, the Communication Arts and Sciences Department, the Huck Institutes of the Life Sciences, and the Humanities Department at Penn State College of Medicine, and Information Technology Liberal Arts.

[6.] Making information observable, data visualizations serve to illuminate complex relationships in a visual manner (D'Ignacio & Bharvaga, 2020). Feminist data visualizations (D'Ignacio & Klein, 2020) can be utilized to disrupt power binaries and present information in a nonhierarchical manner, such as the amalgamation of visual art and creative writings in the *Viral Imaginations* gallery.

[7.] Word clouds are visual representations of aggregated text that demonstrate the frequency of specific terms based on size and/or color.

For example, Erika Richards painted "Pearl Cameo" while healing from COVID-19 and caring for her mother, who was also ill from the virus (see Figure 6). A source of "distraction" and a method of maintaining mental health, this artmaking temporarily removed Richards from her caretaker duties and refocused her attention away from "worrisome thoughts" (Richards, 2021, para. 1). In "Pearl Cameo," Richards shows a woman wearing Victorian clothing within an oval-shaped, pearl frame. Unlike traditional cameos carved from carnelian shell (The Cameo Collection, 2016, para. 5), resulting in a peach or orange color, Richards' cameo features vibrant watercolors of purples, blues, and reds, and displays a woman's head and upper body in a three-quarter perspective, rather than in the customary profile. Notably, pearls, such as those framing the brooch, are often associated with physical and emotional healing properties.[8]

While the artist does not mention the lovely ornate style of the woman within the brooch, it is critical to consider her affective labor of satisfying the male gaze or the act of appearing beautiful for the pleasure of men (Mulvey, 1975). Wearing a vibrant royal blue beaded dress with a ruby red choker necklace, the lady's elegant appearance contrasts with that of typical caregivers, who tend to dress more casually or wear uniforms, such as scrubs. However, trapped within the pearly frame of the brooch, the women's somber expression with eyes cast downward mimics the sorrow and despair of confinement that many caregivers feel when weighed down by immense responsibility.
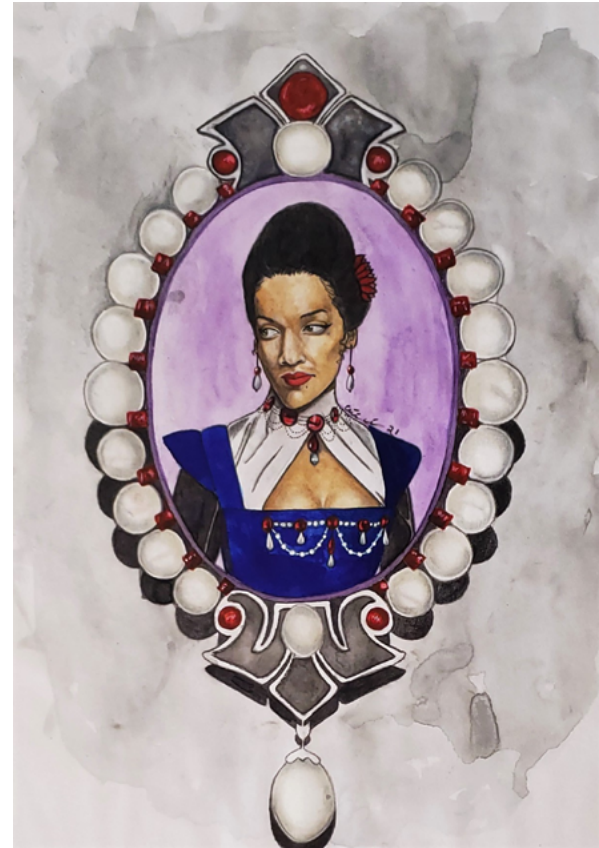

Figure 6. Pearl Cameo by Erika Richards (2021), [watercolor], (11" x 14"). *Pearl Cameo*, created by Erika Richards, is a piece painted while caring for her mother and recovering from COVID-19 as a distraction from both her and her mothers' illness. Included courtesy of Erika Richards.

Creative Storytelling: Narrative Ethics and Feminist Ethics of Care

Collecting artistic reflections on diverse realities was another key focus in the design of *Viral Imaginations* repository to include the experiences and voices of those often omitted from historical accounts. This prong of *Viral Imaginations'* mission provided data for our narrative ethics framework of analysis. Focused on storytelling in which the narrator intertwines observations and emotional content, narrative ethics embraces the narrator's unique viewpoint, including subjective

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[8.] In lore, pearls are frequently tied to healing lung ailments and diseases, as well as balancing the "body's natural cycles," such as aiding in the relief of "negative feelings and negative energy," "tension, and anxiety" (AOV Crystals, 2019, para. 11).

voice, language, perspective, and positionality (Zaharias, 2018). Through the telling and witnessing of stories, something more unfolds—and much more can be derived.

As narrative ethicist Hanna Meretoja explains, narratives enable interpretation "through which we make sense of our lives, and these meaning-making practices are ethically charged" (2017, p. 3). Critical ethical insights garnered through narrative analysis are imperative for self-examination and moral development (Meretoja, 2017, p. 90). Moreover, a narrative ethics approach considers relationships—revealing disparities as well as connections and shared experiences (Meretoja, 2017). Delving into the narratives of individuals with intersectionalities that differ from our own develops "our capacity for empathetic perspective-taking" (Meretoja, 2017, p. 90). For example, Allison Elizabeth Keener's "Contemplative Reflection" (2020) photograph and narrative create an understanding of the isolation primary caregivers for young children often experienced during the pandemic (see Figure 7). This work and the associated artist statement provide poignant insights into the emotional and social deprivation of a woman expected to provide full-time nurturing while simultaneously struggling with her own unmet care needs. Socially distanced from the world around her, like Ritter (see Figure 2), Keener (2020) expressed her sense of isolation in her landscape photography:

> Socially distant, yet so connected. In this image of my son, I'm capturing what it feels like to be socially distant as a mother of a toddler. We're in this public space together, yet no one is here with us. I feel disconnected from the world from sheer exhaustion and the clumsiness of nap times and now, I'm restricting my already limited connections with others even more. I feel small and alone, like he appears in this vibrant landscape. (para. 1)

Figure 7. Contemplative Reflection by Allison Elizabeth Keener (2020), [digital photograph], (10" x 13"). In *Contemplative Reflection*, Allison Elizabeth Keener shares an image of her young son during the COVID-19 pandemic, as isolated from the world, despite being in a public place. Included courtesy of Allison Elizabeth Keener.

Historically, the educated, White, male hegemony co-opted narratives and narrative privilege for its own ends. Standing as gatekeeper, this hegemonic class determined which narratives warranted collection and assigned how much credence such narratives received (Adams, 2008). *Viral Imaginations*, however, attempts to mitigate such privilege by collecting diverse Pennsylvanian accounts. The *Viral Imaginations* team, of which we belonged, curated submissions solely by type (e.g., visual art or creative writing) and date. Displayed together in a publicly accessible gallery, the narratives appear on equal footing—granting all submitters the same narrative privilege. Given the pandemic's disproportionate impact on women, communities of color, and youth (McKinsey, 2020; Peck, 2020), this inclusive extension of narrative privilege allows for a more complete

understanding of the pandemic's ramifications through the examination of creative, experience-based stories.

Viewing *Viral Imaginations'* Works Through Feminist Ethics of Care Perspectives

Considering "the messy contextuality" lived by those who are socially intertwined, embedded, and encumbered in a web of interdependent relationships, feminist ethics of care proffers an inclusive and collaborative approach to normative discourse, accounting for the experiences of so-called "non-ideal actors in non-ideal environments" (Gotlib, 2022, para. 6). Unlike most classical ethical theories, feminist ethics of care considers morality within a contextual milieu, rather than according to freestanding, universal principles. As a feminist theory, feminist ethics of care theorists and practitioners first study care-based conduct and rituals, and then they examine the underlying values of such conduct and traditions in consideration of gender equities (Gary, 2020). This approach to ethics "recognizes emotional and affective capacities as ethically relevant, rather than extraneous and interfering" (Gary, 2020, p. 16). Moreover, instead of looking to the autonomous self, which is central to many long-established ethical traditions, care ethics converges around the relational self through which one's knowledge of self is informed by knowledge of others with whom one is in relation (Andersen & Chen, 2002). As such, feminist ethics of care approaches imbue social relationships and human interdependence with moral weight (Saunder-Staudt, 2022). Specifically, the lens of feminist ethics of care values and advances care-based connections, as well as the well-being of relationship-bound actors—including both caregivers and care receivers (Saunder-Staudt, 2022).

Care-based interactions occurring within the context of relationships often include affective labor—the intangible, emotional support provided by the (often female) caregiver for the benefit of the care recipient (Whitney, 2018). Care ethicist Mercer Gary explains that, although not all care work includes affective labor, an "affective component is frequently necessary" to meet the needs of the care recipient (2020, p. 7). This is typically the case in childcare and familial environments, as well as in education and patient-care settings. Arguably, the mother-child relationship is the most fundamental and affectively intense care connection, and this specific kinship bond frequently acted as a fulcrum for the

pandemic disruptions impacting women.

In healthcare, where women account for 76% of the labor force (Liss, 2021), workers were overwhelmed by successive onslaughts of severely infirm COVID patients, coupled with the need to make triage decisions related to limited resources, short staffing, a scarcity of PPE, the cumbersome nature of layers of protective gear (see Figure 8), public flaunting of precautions and anti-vaccination sentiments, and even attacks on providers. Conditions were so fraught that frontline care workers experienced moral distress due to exponentially heightened levels of physical and emotional strain, as well as personal risk (Moens, 2021). As a result, care workers struggled to meet the affective demands of their profession. In Figure 8, Jessica Glanzpac's "ER Life" (2020), depicts a female nurse in full PPE, demonstrating the peril healthcare providers faced in caring for COVID patients. Glanzpac's digital painting also illustrates the unwieldy barrier that full PPE introduced between providers and COVID patients—making interactions more difficult and feel more impersonal, which complicates care work.

Figure 8. ER Life by Jessica Glanzpac (2020), [digital painting], (12" x 12").
ER Life displays a nurse wearing PPE during the COVID-19 pandemic.
Included courtesy of Jessica Glanzpac.

These pandemic stressors were exacerbated by the economic plight of many direct-care workers. In 2015, women of color made up nearly 50 percent of the direct-care labor force (Campbell, 2017). Despite their employment, approximately half of these women lived in poverty (Campbell, 2017). Unsurprisingly, the insecurities and strains of racialized, gendered, and economically exploitive environments negatively impact workers' ability to provide affective labor (Gary, 2020, p. 8). Moreover, lengthy shifts, a lack of downtime, and unmanageable caseloads further degrade quality care (Gary, 2020).

Viral Imaginations: Women as Community Caregivers

Although care labor is often viewed as centralized in the home, much of women's work during the COVID-19 pandemic extended beyond kin groups, recognizing a broader sense of community and realizing greater societal interconnectivity. For example, in "Homebound," Alison Cardie Jaenicke (2021) describes serving her community by sewing and distributing masks. Similarly, Kari Souders's (2020) "Comfort Blanket" utilizes quilting, a traditionally female handicraft, to assuage herself and those around her in grim times (see Figure 9). Using a tattered U.S. flag, Souders created a blanket "embracing and comforting our nation" (para. 1). Incorporating "hundreds of Thai Buddha amulets, crystals, and evil eyes as a source of good luck" (para. 1), Souders called upon religious and folk symbols to cure the world's contemporary ailments. In doing so, she, like Jaenicke, emphasizes women's sense of responsibility for communal well-being.

Figure 9. Comfort Blanket by Kari Souders (2021), [hand-sewn and hand-beaded fabric collage], (47.5" x 59.5"). In *Comfort Blanket*, Kari Souders utilizes a USA flag to illustrate her desire to heal the United States. Included courtesy of Kari Souders.

Janet Cincotta's (2020) "Until This. Until Now." confronted the embodied guilt of not being able to serve the community due to age-related vulnerability:

> I had hoped to join the army of brave, dedicated doctors
> and nurses who are out there on the front lines in the battle
> against this unseen enemy. I had hoped to do my part because
> I'm a physician. I am fully qualified and capable of pitching in

to support them, except for one problem. I'm also an official card-carrying member of the Covid-19 high-risk population, meaning my body can't churn out the kind of antibodies I would need to fight the infection if I picked it up somewhere. I would be doomed, so I've been asked to step away. Just because I'm old. Despite a compelling sense of duty, of urgency, of longing, I have been banished from joining my colleagues who are hard at work saving lives in the hospital where I practiced medicine for over thirty years. Meaning, I can't help at all.

Which, I believe, is what we were put here to do. To help.

(paras. 1-2)

Cincotta's written submission illustrates the guilt and shame that women can face due to an inability to provide care work and the chagrin they feel for putting their own health and survival first. The last line of the piece reinforces the notion that women internalize the role and duty of helping and experience feelings of inadequacy when they cannot comply with such obligations (Cincotta, 2020).

Valuing "Women's Work" Amid Social Disruption

Creative narratives from the *Viral Imaginations* archive demonstrate how women rapidly adapted their lives and livelihoods during the Covidian era. While the works in the archive encompass experiences of COVID-19, the gendered pivots are not the exclusive province of this particular pandemic. As such, the *Viral Imaginations* archive will serve as a resource for future global healthcare crises and their economic and societal fallout. The works of visual art and creative writing highlighted in this article illustrate how exogenous occurrences and the needs of others impose on women's temporal and emotional resources during times of crisis due to gendered norms within a non-egalitarian social structure. Moreover, these levies, while sudden in onset, have not been short-lived.

The costs, which cannot simply be calculated in economic terms, impact society as reductions of well-being, squandered human resources, and reversals of gains derived from decades of feminist efforts. Women's affective and domestic labor, as well as their individual and cohort-based sacrifices to care for others,

in line with the norms of care ethics, must be seen and honored. "While the experience of crisis may well be dire, it can also create an opening for change" (Gary, 2020, p. 11). Highlighting women's unpaid, often invisible labor, which intensified during the pandemic, this article calls for recognition and valuing of women as vital care workers, who nurture and sustain society. Such valuing must take the form of respect and fair remuneration for care work and care workers, as well as equal pay so that decisions between spousal incomes do not automatically result in the discounting of women's jobs.

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Women's Work
By Michele Mekel

The calendar turns
another solar year—
a decade in Covid time.

We laud ourselves
for having survived,
hoping—not believing—
things will return
to a "normal"
that is no more.

We women folk—
with jobs, dependents,
never-ending housework—
easily pass for living dead.

Our energy, affective labor
run completely dry—
despite demands for more.

Very simply,
we've no fucks left
to give this
gendered pandemic.

Figure 10. In the poem *Women's Work*, Michele Mekel (2022) describes the exhaustion experienced by women due to the demands of ever-increasing amounts of care-related labor expected of them during the pandemic.

Figure 11. Fun Home by Zoya Baloch (2020). [Mixed Media], In *Fun Home*, 7-year-old Zoya Baloch, the daughter of author Lauren Stetz, illustrates her household during the COVID-19 pandemic. Enthusiastically embracing her new homeschooled environment, Baloch depicts a map of the home using vibrant colors and assorted materials, including tape, marker, yarn, and sticky notes.