

# Another kind of economics

Lucia Davis

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During the lockdown, mothers and those performing mothering had extra duties of care, regeneration, and reproduction, to substitute for services that were out of reach. They didn't just talk about a new normal, they worked through it, because the safety and wellbeing of others depended on how efficient they were. In isolation, ethnic mothering resorted to ethnic solutions to crisis response, in addition to the mainstream ones.



How do we focus Covid 19 recovery on the crude reminder of what is essential, and allow diverse models of recovery to enrich our shared, and hopefully equitable response?

Like most ethnic women in New Zealand, I devote time to promote my culture. Amongst other things, I practice Romanian traditional dances within the group Doina. Before the lockdown, we were getting ready to dance at the Auckland Multicultural Festival. This means rehearsing two hours per week, preparing our costumes, selecting the program, liaising with other groups and with the organisers, promoting, project managing. It is volunteer work, significant to us for its cultural reproduction features, and contributing to Aotearoa's cultural capital. In the market economy, unless we count the financial transactions to hire community centres for our rehearsals, this work is invisible.

Auckland Multicultural Festival was cancelled. During the lockdown, we moved our group online, with less dance rehearsal, and more organizing our world. Because our world and its economy didn't come to a halt; contrarily, it intensified – a vivid reminder of the origin of the word economy, derived from the Greek oikonomia, which means 'household management'. In this economy, we were ensuring the essentials: feeding and caring for those around us, keeping them alive and well. My fellow ethnic women dancers, even those involved in what was deemed previously essential work of production and banking, were busy doing the real essential work. They told me: in this crisis situation, our love and care for our families intensified tenfold. We became more protective, more loving, more caring. We enjoyed having our family together, and we looked after it, as we looked after our colleagues and teams at work, we nurtured and gave assurance. We kept the connection with family and friends from around the world and shared worries, hopes and laughter and we cried with them. We regenerated ethnic economics in household routines that involved baking, sewing, crafting and performing arts. We role-modelled and reproduced ethnic

celebrations, language and culture, nurturing, calming, balancing, and hoping. This work was always essential to us, our families, and communities, but, as with our dances, invisible in the market economy.

Household management happens within the boundaries of one's home and is less visible in the public arena. The lockdown made it even less visible. The isolation brought inherent risks and generated worries: not abstract worries about macroeconomic conditions, but immediate, fundamental human worries such as the fact that somebody we know, or we don't even know, but we care about, may not have enough food for her children, enough resilience and strength to get through, even worse, she may get sick, and we are not there to see it, yet even to help.

One thing that was widely visible, though, was that the market economy was not prepared to withstand a crisis like Covid-19. Its profit expansion upgraded the risks of spreading the virus. Its competitiveness' principles blocked its supply chain features. Instead of the economy helping us surpass the current challenge, we were left in limbo with questions on this economic system that crashes when assessed against standards of essential needs for human life.

Experts say that we need a resilient economy, that kind of economy that doesn't destroy people's lives when it has to stop for a while. I think we need more. We thought that the key workers in our society were the bankers, and those involved in the production of goods (post-covid 'goods' may be a concept to be redefined). We were wrong: essential were the people keeping us safe, involved in care, reproduction, and regeneration. The nurse and the cleaner in the hospital, the essential worker in the supermarket paid the minimal wage, many of them migrant women, suddenly became essential to our lives, while putting their lives on the line. These are people in jobs traditionally performed by women, consistently paid less than people in jobs traditionally performed by men. When we consider the value that we attach to their working hours, they are the people who can least afford it. In a now enlightened perspective of what economy should be, it is economically damaging and morally wrong. We need a social re-evaluation of what really counts, so what we know we really care about in time of crisis, would have been reflected in our economy in time of preparation.

The risks of rushing to save an economy that didn't save us are imminent for women, and greater for migrant women: while women are more likely to lose their jobs due to the Covid-19 crisis, the Government's planned economic recovery efforts favour infrastructure projects, where the workforce is dominated by men. A gender lens to government spending is being evaded. While lockdown has been considered as causing increasing incidences of domestic violence, a major contributing factor is an economy that attaches less value to work performed by women and consequently, to the women performing this work. A genderless economy is generically a patriarchal economy, in which women's work will continue to be undervalued, invisible, unequally retributed, thus enhancing accelerating inequity. The irony is if we take the decision to continue on this path after we experienced how essential care, regeneration and reproduction were, and how insightful their reprioritisation over production work has been.

With Level 1, my fellow Romanian dancers are back in the transactional economy, balancing ethnic and mainstream within the paid and non-paid work label trap. Our dance rehearsals have started again. The steps are complicated, and to orchestrate them together in seamless shared action is complex, yet we didn't forget the routines. It is the muscle memory, and something deeper that takes us back to the rhythm of the lockdown time, where we revived our traditional economies, regenerated deep-rooted practices, and reproduced ethnic ways to respond to a crisis.