

CONVERSATION

Pouring Out, Pouring In. Mapping Women's Work

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Information

Received 7 August 2024
Accepted 9 October 2024
Online 11 April 2025

Keywords

feminist economics
Glasgow
feminist exchange network
arts-based research
care

Abstract

Ailie Rutherford is a visual artist, curator and the founder and artistic director of Feminist Exchange Network, a Glasgow based collective led by women and other marginalised genders which uses social and activist art to explore feminist economics in practice and in relation to women's lived experience. Ailie's feminist economic artworks have been shown internationally including Unbox festival (India), Institute of Network Cultures (Netherlands), Supermarkt (Germany), Rum 46 (Denmark), Van Abbemuseum (Netherlands), Sheffield DocFest (England), and Documenta 15 (Germany).

In 2023, artist Ailie Rutherford was commissioned by the University of Glasgow and Glasgow Women's Library (GWL) to create an exhibition and workshop series as part of the project 'Women in multiple low-paid employment: pathways between, care and health' (2020-2024). The academic project was the first to study the nature and extent of women's multiple low paid employment (MLPE) in the UK. Ailie Rutherford led a series of workshops at GWL entitled 'Mapping Women's Work'.¹ The resulting exhibition *Pouring Out, Pouring In* shared prints and other outcomes from the workshop series wherein the women involved mapped out their multiple paid and unpaid roles, thinking together about what a more equitable economic system might look like.

This excerpt is from the *Pouring Out, Pouring In* exhibition booklet,² co-authored by artist Ailie Rutherford along with lead researcher Louise Lawson, at University of Glasgow, and GWL curator Caroline Gausden. It describes the process and shares prints and other outcomes from the workshop series which visualized the complex nature of work and care for many women. *Pouring out, Pouring In* demonstrates how artistic work intersects with the Degrowth Agenda to collectively research and develop alternative socially just futures.

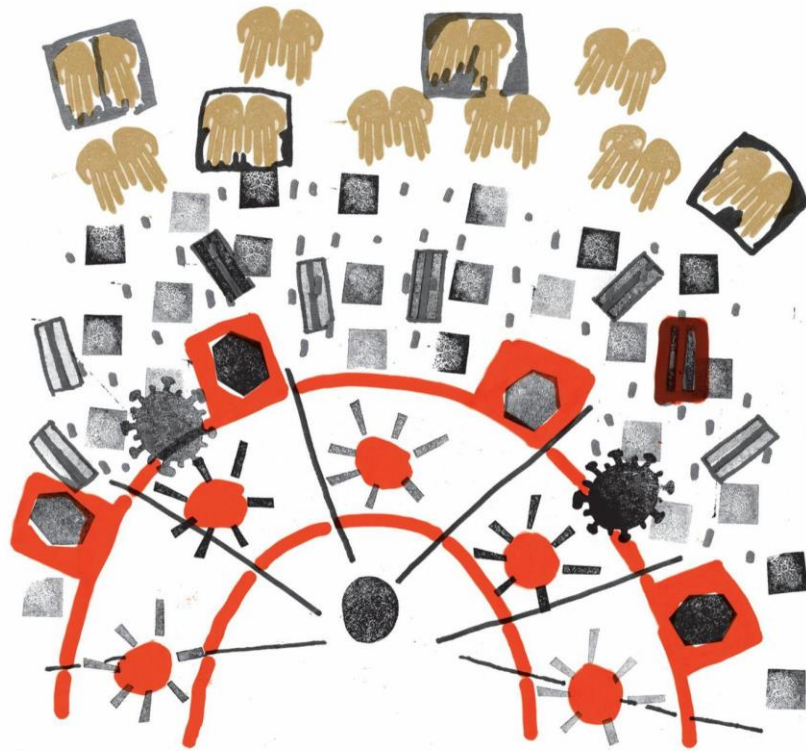
The work is funded by the Nuffield Foundation, an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being.

¹ Participatory workshops at GWL employed a block-print mapping toolkit developed by the artist through her long-term work on feminist economies. This toolkit, designed as an accessible, hands-on and easily replicable method, enabled the women to map the complexities of their work and care roles. Using printed symbols to visualise economic factors such as unpaid labour, the toolkit creates a shared visual language that overcomes barriers. This work contributes to 'feminist data commons', where participants collaboratively create visual data to narrate their lived experiences and collectively imagine new possibilities.

² The *Pouring Out, Pouring In* publication includes prints of all the artworks produced as well as the full interview and is [available to buy online](#) and in person from Glasgow Women's Library.



"Pouring Out, Pouring In: Mapping Women's Work" print by artist Ailie Rutherford, created with Jackie McMaster



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Pouring Out, Pouring In

Excerpt from a conversation between **Caroline Gausden**, Development Worker for Programming and Curating at Glasgow Women's Library, **Louise Lawson**, Lead Researcher on Women in multiple low-paid employment and **Ailie Rutherford**, commissioned Artist.

Caroline: Ailie, your work with the Feminist Exchange Network (FEN) made you a good fit for a project that seeks to critically understand women's work, particularly where it is multiple, low paid and consequently involving a complicated juggling act. Can you say a little bit more about what motivates you to look at these areas of economics and labour in your artistic practice?

Ailie: My work with FEN (a women-led³ collective I initiated in South Glasgow) is centred on looking at how feminist economic theory relates to the lived experiences of women and other marginalised genders. The work began in 2015 born from a need to better understand the economic doctrine that dominates our lives, in order to conceptualise alternatives. In a lot of ways, it's work that is fuelled by both rage and hopefulness – as well as thinking critically about the way things are, there's a hopefulness that we can make things better.

Feminist economics begins by recognising that the whole capitalist economy is built on this concept of a rational, autonomous man. Centuries of macho thinking have left us with an economy that values violence and exploitation over everything else. Alongside this, there's an assumption that anyone identifying as a woman is naturally meant to be a caregiver, destined for endless undervalued work. This doesn't just create unfair and unrealistic gender norms but also devalues crucial work done by people of all genders: caring, community building, creative projects, fighting for justice - basically, everything that maintains and sustains us. So it's no wonder so many women find themselves stuck, as Louise says "working for nothing."

³ Women and other marginalised genders.

While we continue to work within a system that devalues feminised work, the need to keep fighting for change feels more urgent than ever.

Caroline: Yes! So how did this translate practically? What did you and project participants do together?

Ailie: The block print mapping process we used in the workshops I initially designed with groups of women in Govanhill, Glasgow during a residency. We co-designed a set of symbols to visualise and value the work women were doing - to understand its strength, the networks women are constantly building to support their undervalued labour – recognising what works, and thinking about what could be different. These symbols have evolved over time as the conversations grew. During the women's library workshops, the women added a symbol for 'enough' using gold ink – to convey enough love, enough pay, feeling good enough, and putting a limit on unpaid labour. It's a process designed to shift our perspective on the economy and our place within it.

Many of the women who came to the workshops at Glasgow Women's Library talked of their passion for the work they do, the fierce love they have for their work and the things they care for, the constantly creative ways they navigate a system stacked against us as women. It's this passion that keeps us going against the odds, continuing to creatively juggle and organize and make the almost impossible keep on happening.

Conversations with workshop participants often circled back to imagining a better system - like sharing resources equally or having a universal basic income and how those simple systems could lead us to some profound changes. The collaborative maps, crafted by women working together at round tables, outline how we could live and work together differently.

Caroline: For me the maps do create a different language and one that feels inspiring in places, can you tell me a little bit more about the conversations that fed into this process of mapping and reimagining? We have had FEN's mobile library in our space – I was wondering

if any resources from there proved to be particularly relevant to the conversations?

Ailie: The resources from the FEN library played a crucial role in placing our conversations within a broader political context. The FEN mobile library, initially launched at Swap Market (a non-monetary exchange project we ran from 2018-2020), began with the collection of books that explored diverse economic models, community networks, and alternatives to the conventional capitalist framework. As the project evolved, our book collection expanded to encompass works that bridge feminism with decolonisation, climate justice, and environmental activism.

Throughout the workshops here at the women's library, certain books became touchstones, with quotes from these books finding their way onto their maps. Particularly relevant to our discussions were books such as 'The Care Manifesto' by The Care Collective, 'Labours Of Love' by Madeleine Bunting, 'Feminism, Interrupted: Disrupting Power' by Lola Olufemi, 'The Care We Dream Of' by Zena Sharman and 'Our Work Is Everywhere' by Syan Rose as our conversations moved into the intersections of gender inequalities with disability, neurodiversity, race and class.

A significant number of workshop participants openly shared their experiences as neurodiverse women and women with disabilities. This shed light on the concept of self-care being an extra layer of work—especially for those with disabilities or neurodiverse traits. Take the scenario of the added effort required to align with a system built around a specific kind of logic, often termed as "neurotypicality." A recurring theme that emerged from these discussions was the constant struggle many women face, navigating a system that wasn't created for us.

A particularly memorable conversation centred around the notion that women are often credited with being skilled multitaskers. However, in reality, it's often a matter of necessity due to the numerous roles we need to juggle. We delved into how women have become adept at "masking," appearing to have everything under control when, beneath the surface, we might be grappling more than it appears. This includes concealing stress or not disclosing

aspects of ourselves that could potentially hinder us in securing paid employment—things like childcare needs, disabilities, or neurodiversity. One participant vividly described her work persona as “feeling like a swan moving gracefully through the water, but underneath you can see our legs furiously paddling.”

I’d be really interested to know how much these conversations about women feeling the need to mask certain aspects of themselves in order to get paid work came up in your research Louise?

Louise: Masking is a concept I can completely relate to from a personal perspective. As Ailie said, women tend to be regarded as innate multi-taskers rather than multi-tasking being a necessity to get through the day. In the project many of the ‘multi-tasking’ women struggled with having to think of everything and do everything in the context of their working lives, including the most mundane of tasks: “making packed lunches is exhausting”; “working flat out and still having to buy the toilet roll when it runs out”; “trying to do everything and be ‘supermum’, it was horrendous”. There was a memorable interview where a woman (who identified as a lone parent with a child with complex and demanding needs) dreaded going back to the office after working from home as it exposed her personal and family difficulties.

Although not always explicit, many women were putting on a good front and holding it together in their paid work in addition to all their other roles and responsibilities. Let’s face it, most of us don’t want to be seen as crumbling or not coping. The interview – and the art workshops - gave women an outlet to express how they really feel about their lives, and I don’t think many people have that opportunity. I’m still working with the interview data and ‘masking’ is something I will look out for as I continue the analysis.

Ailie: That feeling of absolute exhaustion was something we talked about in the workshops too. When we then moved into collaborative mapping processes, working together to envision a better system, a dedicated space for rest and rejuvenation frequently emerged as a core element.

From there, the focus expanded outward to encompass broader networks of care, thinking about basic frameworks that could facilitate the creation of care networks without adding to the workload - creativity being a recurrent theme.

Several of the women who came to the workshops have a creative practice but few would call themselves artists or feel like they have time or space for creativity in their lives. Even among those of us who can call ourselves artists, we shared the ongoing challenges of staying afloat within a system that demands substantial amounts of unpaid labour from artists while consistently undervaluing creative work. Which led us back round to conversations about fairer systems of resource sharing and how a basic income could impact women's lives.

Caroline: I think these thoughts, that have come out of the process, about the intersection between creativity in women who do not call themselves artists and artists is interesting and can help us draw some conclusions about what types of labours are defined as creative. Often relational labour so caregiving, obviously, but also other types of work including the organisational flair you would need to balance multiple jobs is not seen as creative while an isolated person in a studio (traditionally and in popular imagination this has been autonomous man you mention in relation to capitalism) with no relational ties is typically how we view an artist. Of course, Ailie your work does not easily fit into this second category. The maps themselves are beautiful objects but they also function as a way to connect people. I wonder if to close you could tell us a little more about that Ailie? Also Louise you mentioned that other, less visible, collaboration between artist and researcher, do you think in future there could be a shared map for this?

Ailie: I'm not sure that a more isolated style of artistic practice is necessarily a male trait; artists of all genders choose to work in isolation for various reasons. But there is a definite feminist angle to a more collaborative practice that seeks to convey multiple narratives rather than a singular voice. Collaborative art-making runs counter to the capitalist notion of the solo genius.

Similarly, I think a lot of creative work goes into all kinds of community organising, being able to imagine a world that looks different and prioritises cooperative working over competition.

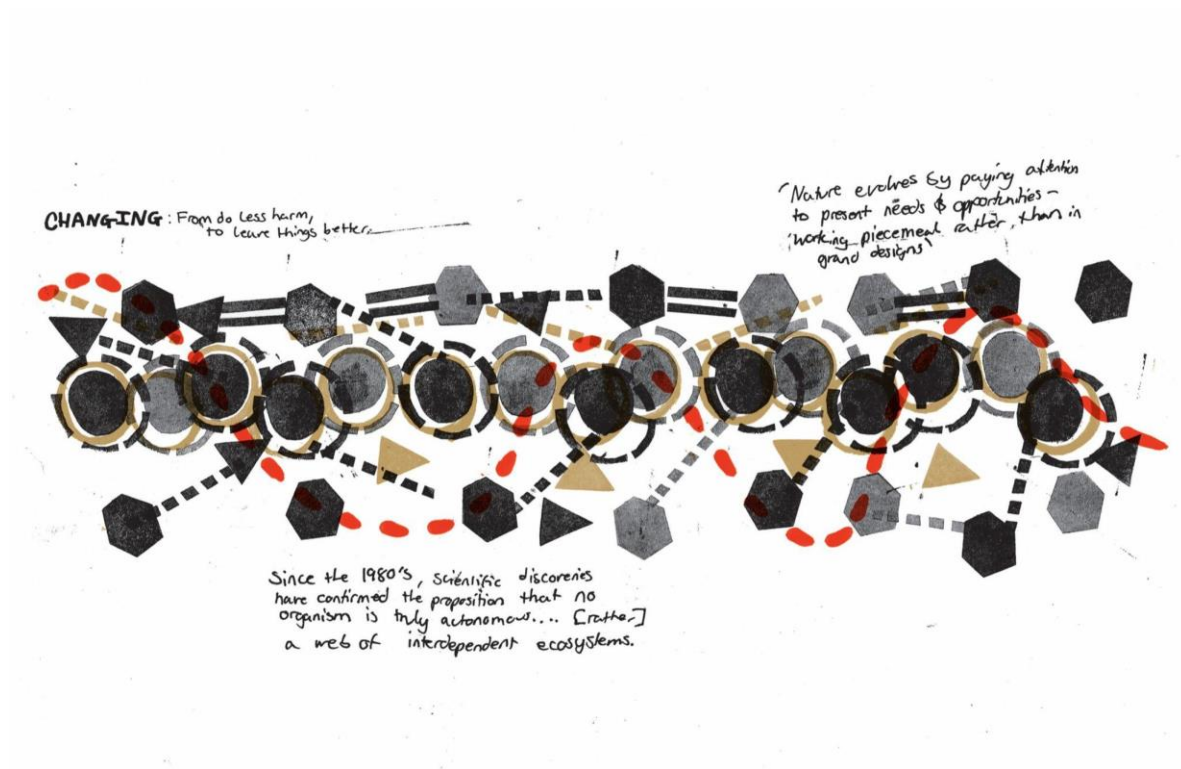
I hope that the mapping process serves as a way for people to connect. In the workshops, women who returned to participate in multiple sessions discussed how the process had given them a sense of solidarity by recognizing the value in each other's work. There was an incredible calm focus in the workshops, and I hope that the printing process opens up a space for us to think differently together, to talk about our individual experiences, find commonalities in our struggles, and imagine alternatives together.

The resulting images within this book are a bit like encoded diagrams. They are abstracted just enough, I hope, to convey something of the systems and networks we described and imagined together. Meanwhile, the details of the conversations remain a private dialogue among the women who created them.

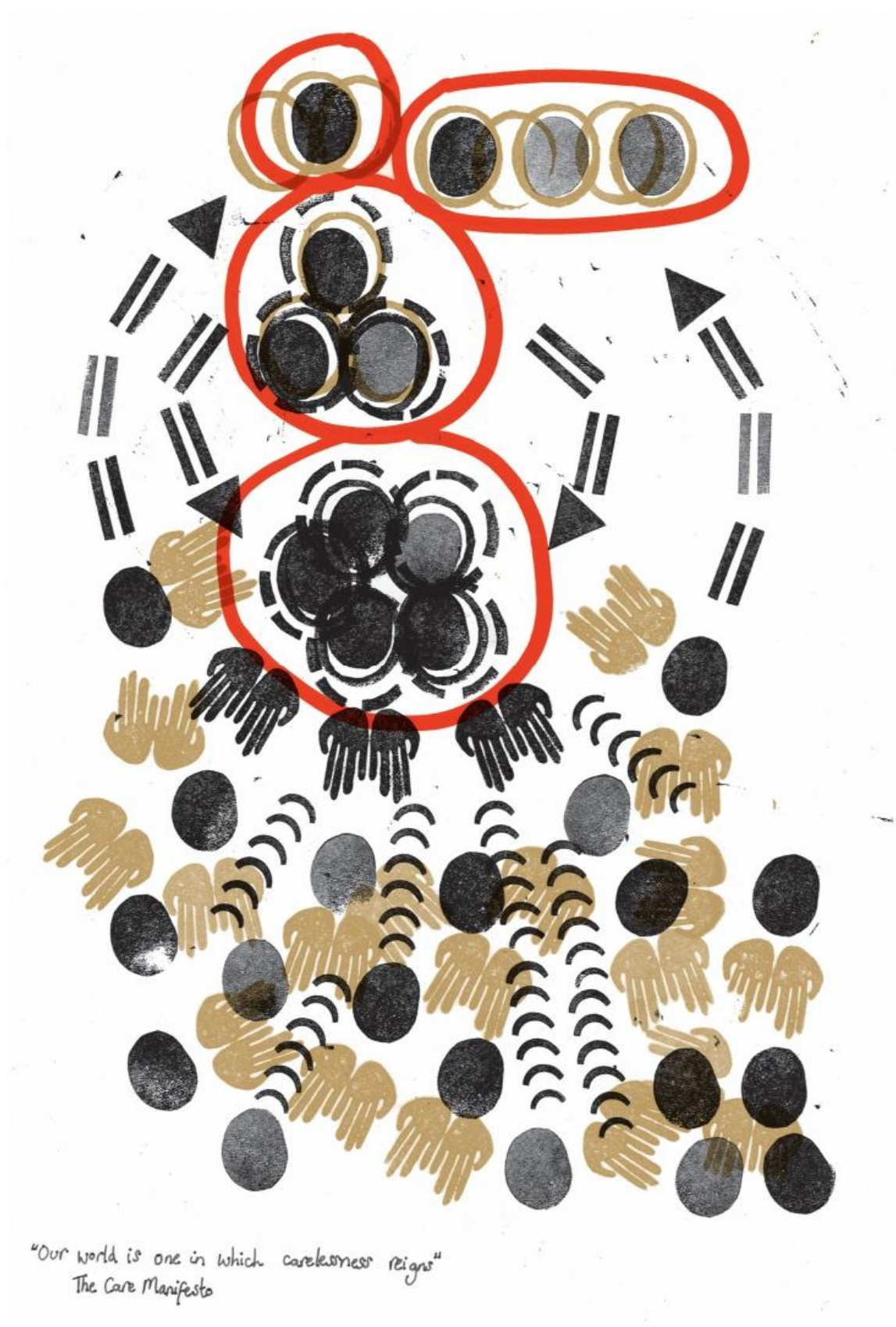
Louise: Working in collaboration has certainly opened my eyes to new ways of thinking and doing. I hope there has been learning on both sides and that we can reflect on what went well, as well as how we might change things given the opportunity again: imagining a 'better system'. I like the idea of mapping as an alternative means of communication, an 'encoded diagram'. I am sure we can create a map for this type of collaborative working in the future, but we may need to make some new stamps!



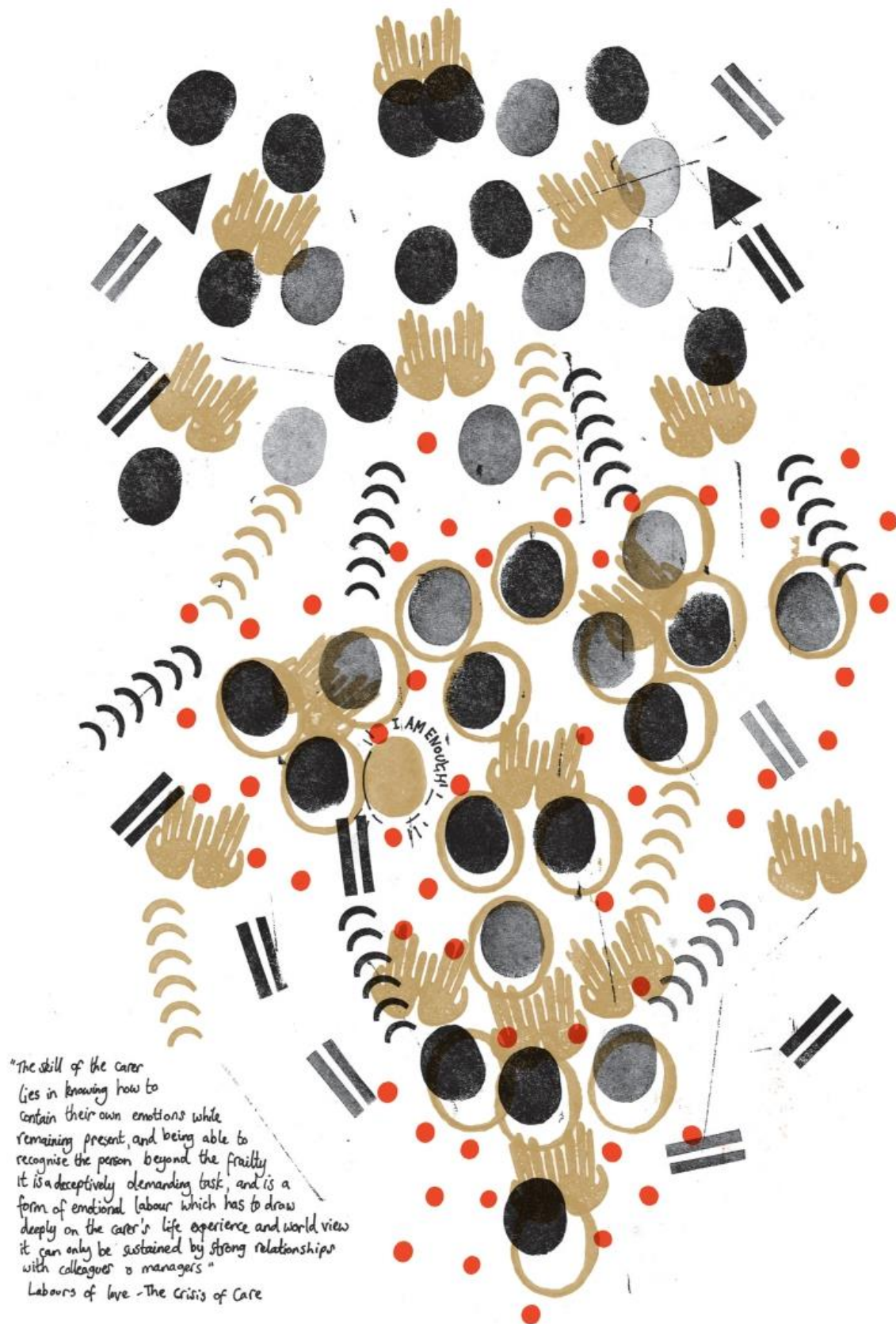
"Pouring Out, Pouring In: Mapping Women's Work" print by artist Ailie Rutherford, created with Claire McGinnis



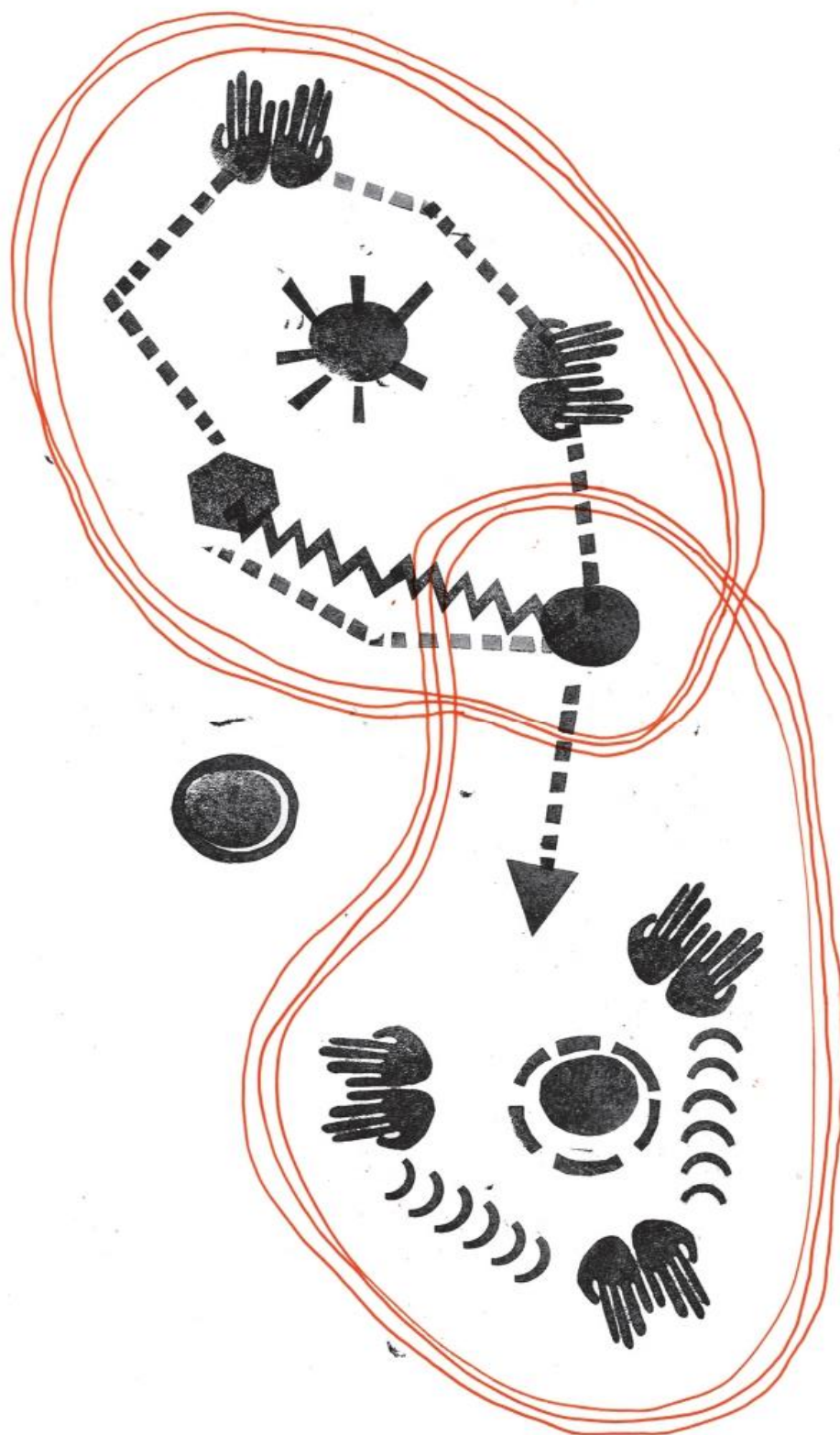
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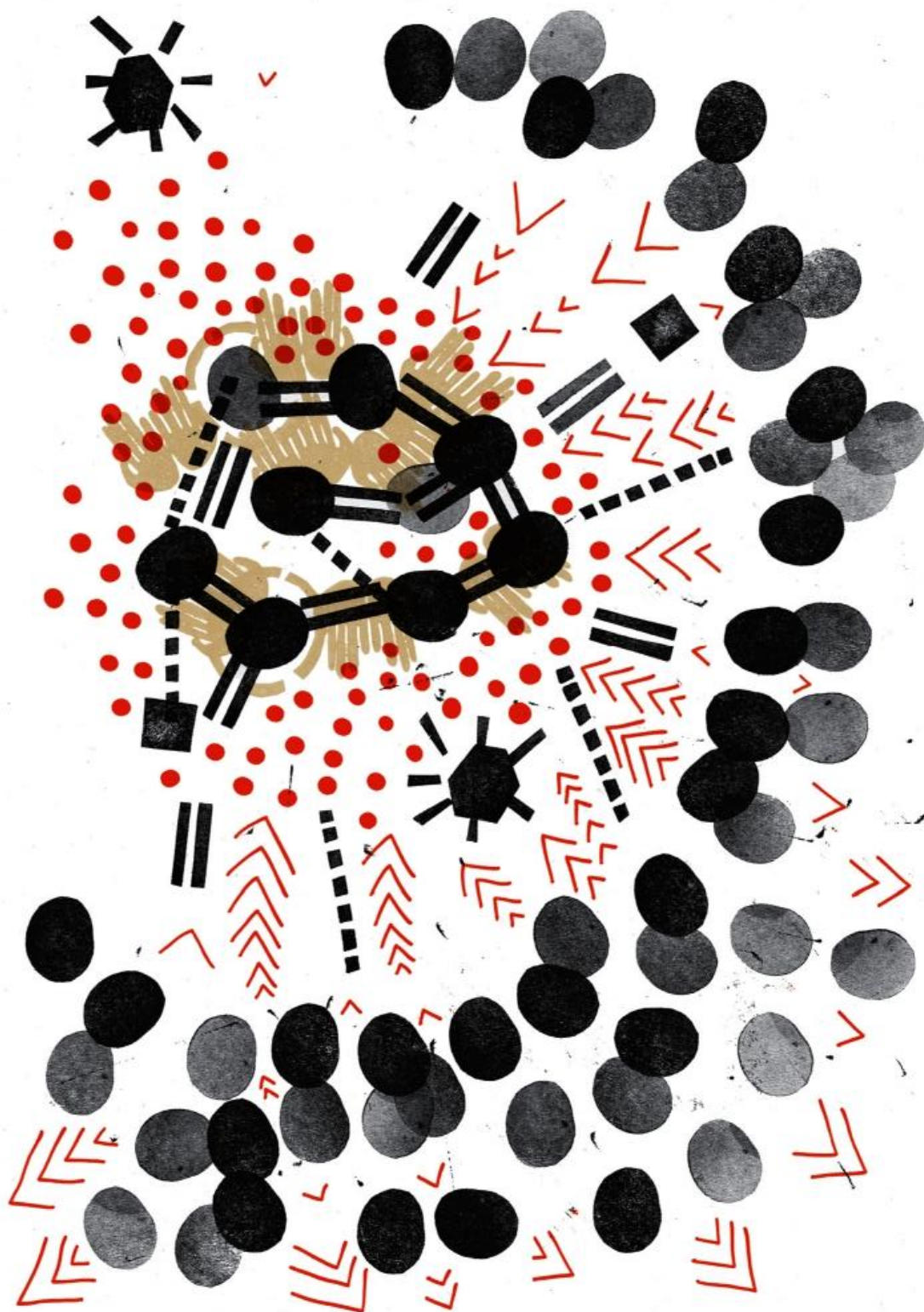
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"Pouring Out, Pouring In: Mapping Women's Work" print by artist Ailie Rutherford, created with Natsumi Sakamoto



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Conflict of interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to disclose.

Funding

The work was funded by the Nuffield Foundation. The Nuffield Foundation is an independent charitable trust with a mission to advance social well-being. The Foundation has funded this work, but the views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily the Foundation.

The authors

The authors are Ailie Rutherford, Caroline Gausden and Louise Lawson.

Ailie Rutherford is a visual artist, curator and the founder and artistic director of Feminist Exchange Network, a Glasgow based collective led by women and other marginalised genders which uses social and activist art to explore feminist economics in practice and in relation to women's lived experience. Ailie's feminist economic artworks have been shown internationally including Unbox festival (India), Institute of Network Cultures (Netherlands), Supermarkt (Germany), Rum 46 (Denmark), Van Abbemuseum (Netherlands), Sheffield DocFest (England), and Documenta 15 (Germany).

Caroline Gausden is a development worker for programming and curating at Glasgow Women's Library. She holds a practice based PhD in Feminist Manifestos and Social Art Practice from Gray's School of Art. Caroline has published on *Accessibility, Inclusion and Diversity in Critical Event Studies* (2019), *Curating with Care* (2023) and recently co-curated the exhibitions *No Cover Up* with Ingrid Pollard and *Life Support* with artists including Martha Rosler, Alberta Whittle and Olivia Plender, with whom she continues to work on *Our Bodies are not the Problem, The Problem is Power*.

Louise Lawson is a Lecturer in Urban Studies, Public Policy and Health Policy in the School of Social and Political Sciences, (University of Glasgow) and acted as the principal investigator of the project 'Women in Multiple Low-paid Employment: Pathways between Work, Care and Health' conducted at the University of Glasgow (December 2020 - September 2024). The project examined the relationships between MLPE, caring responsibilities and health and well-being. Louise has published in her publications on the impacts and dynamics of neighbourhood demolition, regeneration, relocation and community empowerment.

The affiliated organisation and project

Glasgow Women's Library⁴ (GWL) is the only Accredited Museum in the UK dedicated to women's lives, histories and achievements, with a Lending Library, archive collections, innovative exhibitions program, events and learning opportunities.

The University of Glasgow project, 'Women in multiple low-paid employment: pathways between work, care and health' (2020-2024),⁵ examined the relationships between MLPE, caring responsibilities and health and well-being. Using mixed methods, it includes the analysis of three large-scale UK representative survey datasets, and in-depth interviews (105) with women who are in multiple low-paid employment by their definition.

⁴ <https://womenslibrary.org.uk/event/pouring-out-pouring-in-visualising-womens-multiple-work/>

⁵ <https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/project/women-multiple-low-paid-employment-work-care-health>