In this article, we outline an interdisciplinary exploration into the invisibilisation of social reproduction, most of which still continues to be done by women. In this introduction and themed section, we argue that the neglect of social reproduction has material costs for those responsible for it, which we theorise as ‘depletion through social reproduction’ (Rai et al, 2014) – and these costs are gendered. As a facet of governing processes, the law is important here. In this themed section, we examine the issue of law, harm and depletion through social reproduction to show how different strategies are already being used by individuals, households and communities to mitigate depletion and how this is being addressed (or not) at the policy and legal levels – local, national and international. To explore this issue, we have brought together sociologists, political economists and lawyers to develop insights that can be of value to political scientists and to the policy community.

Key words social reproduction • depletion • harm • law • state • mitigation • replenishment • transformation

Key messages
• This themed section is an interdisciplinary exploration into the invisibilisation of social reproduction.
• The neglect of social reproduction has gendered costs, which we theorise as ‘depletion through social reproduction’.
• The law and the state underpin gendered norms and are both important institutions to study in this context.
• Mitigation strategies are used by individuals, households and communities, which need to be supported at the policy and legal levels.

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Introduction

This themed section is an interdisciplinary exploration into the invisibilisation of social reproduction – the work of maintaining life – and the costs of this neglect for individuals, households and communities, both conceptually – as depletion through social reproduction (Rai et al., 2014) – and in terms of policy framing. Most social reproductive work that is unpaid is done by women and the fact of not counting this work fundamentally alters their relationship with the state – instead of seen as citizens with entitlements, they are framed as recipients of welfare (Rai et al., 2014: 7). Paid social reproductive work is also gendered, being feminised, poorly paid and of a lower status in terms of its treatment by employers and the state. This is an urgent and important issue, having been flagged up in the Sustainable Development Goals (5.4) as a human rights concern as a result of sustained campaigns by feminist scholars and activists. To explore this issue, we have brought together sociologists, political economists and lawyers to develop insights that can be of value to political scientists and to the policy community.

As we shall see in the articles in this themed section, the state and regional and international bodies frame social reproduction in many different ways – through law, social policy and budgetary decisions. These are informed by concerns with shifting population trends, decisions that men and women make to join the labour market or not, and the care needs of society – all of which are affected by the ways in which social reproduction is carried out. Therefore, the importance of this concept and its empirical manifestations is crucial in understanding the politics of our times. For example, take the issue of care that has been so prominent in public policy debates and discourses in Europe recently: the gap between the need for care and the carers available is increasing in Europe; global care chains are filling this gap to some extent, which affects the care regimes of the countries sending carers to the Global North; and conditions of work, violence against migrants and the state regulation of migration are all core concerns that are affected by the crisis of social reproduction. Furthermore, as the articles in the section explore, the neglect of social reproduction has material costs for those responsible for it – and these costs are gendered. This is where the law comes in as a facet of governing processes. In this themed section, we examine the issue of law, harm and depletion through social reproduction to show how different strategies are already being used by individuals, households and communities to mitigate depletion, and how this is being addressed (or not) at the policy and legal levels – local, national and international. We note that while the inclusion of unpaid social reproductive work in the United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (5.4) is an important step forward, we have a long way to go before this issue is adequately and holistically addressed. This themed section is an interdisciplinary collection that explores the central themes of harm, depletion and social reproduction through a range of issues, policy frameworks and geographical contexts at a multi-scalar level.

The themed section also reflects on how the law frames social reproduction and its costs. For example, think about the law of compensation: who does the law compensate in a case of neglect? The one directly affected by the lack of health and safety provisions, of course, but what about the one who cares, at often great personal costs, for the sick (see, for example, Goldblatt and Rai, 2018)? Bringing together these conceptual and empirical insights, we also build on the concept of depletion through social reproduction (hereafter, depletion). Here, the argument is that the
neglect of social reproduction leads to the intensification of the depletion of those engaged in it. For example, without the recognition of the value of this work, the state does not pay attention to what the UK Women’s Budget Group (no date) has called ‘social infrastructure’ – support for childcare, social care, education and health, among other resources that support social reproduction. In turn, this increases the harm and depletion experienced by individuals, households and communities. We outline this cluster of issues to introduce an area of research that is important, urgent and critical to our reimaginings of the household, the state and the international discourse on care. In the following, we elaborate further on the substantive areas of research covered in the themed section and outline some thoughts for future research.

What the foregoing thumbnail sketch of the importance of making visible and valuing social reproduction underlines is the impossibility of studying it through one disciplinary lens; rather, a multidisciplinary if not interdisciplinary lens is needed. For example, one way of recognising social reproductive work is through the law. If the state is the focus of demands about social infrastructure and welfare regimes (standard social and political policy demands), we also see possibilities in the law for preventing harm caused by social reproduction that depletes those doing this work; compensation is a particularly important and interesting area to examine in this regard. Legal recognition of this harm can lead to compensation for the harm resulting in this depletion, both to assist those harmed and to bring institutional recognition to the issue of unsupported care work. We worry that if this question is not addressed, then the legal frameworks for addressing gendered modes of caring will continue to harm those engaged in such care, rather than ensuring that caring can be fulfilling for all those who are engaged in it, as well as those who are being cared for. We argue that through the study of state policy, informed by legal shifts related to the private/public domains of life and work (Boyd, 1997), we can better map the harm that the neglect of social reproduction causes and the remedies that we can mobilise to reverse this. This themed section addresses the question of how we can broaden legal and political definitions of harm to include recognition of and compensation for depletion through social reproduction, and to mitigate such harms and transform the conditions that produce them.

In the following, we will explain the concept of depletion through social reproduction and outline how it can affect our understanding of relational harm in law. We ask: can we bring together the concept of depletion and feminist understandings of harm to equip law to address gendered injustices in the treatment of social reproduction? To do so, we address the following questions:

- What role can the state play in developing policies that address the depletion that accrues from social reproduction, as well as the harm attendant upon such depletion?
- Is legal change, whether through legislation or the courts, an effective way of addressing the depletion of individuals, households and communities through expanding the remit and reach of the compensatory regime?
- Can we include ideas of harm due to depletion in international law in framing a range of compensatory/reparative responses?

Addressing these questions will allow us to show why these are: (1) important to our understanding of feminist work on harm; (2) useful in pointing to the leverage that
interdisciplinary work on harm can provide; and (3) valuable in indicating where scalar issues – from the micro- to the macro-level – impinge on policymaking and how these might be addressed. It is important to note that this issue is a global issue and we approach it as such. The articles in this themed section traverse the North–South boundary as they explore the different manifestations of depletion through social reproduction, as well as strategies to reverse it, which are outlined at the national, regional and international levels.

Concepts: social reproduction, depletion and harm

Before we discuss depletion, let us outline what we understand by three key concepts that we use in this article: social reproduction, depletion through social reproduction and harm. Not all the articles use each of these concepts in the same way, but we largely agree on these broad conceptual outlines. While the debate on the concept is long-standing, Hoskyns and Rai (2007: 300) have defined social reproduction in the following way: the concept includes:

1) biological reproduction, which includes reproducing labour and the provision of the sexual, emotional and affective services that are required to maintain households and intimate relationships – the socialisation of sexuality;
2) production in the home, of both goods and services, incorporating some types of home based agriculture, different forms of care, as well as social provisioning and voluntary work directed at meeting needs in and of the community; [and] 3) reproduction of culture and ideology, which stabilises (and sometimes challenges) dominant social relations. (See also Laslett and Brenner, 1989: 382–3; for a review of the debates on social reproduction, see Bhattacharya, 2017)

Clearly, the definition cuts across the divide between paid and unpaid work, and illustrates the complexity of the relationship between the two as ‘part of the same socio-economic process’ (Bezanson and Luxton, 2006: 37).

Before neoclassical economics put the emphasis almost exclusively on production, social reproduction was regarded as being at the centre of capital accumulation (Bakker and Silvey, 2008: 2). Subsequently, the emphasis on production has led to the positioning of social reproduction as a ‘second-level’ activity outside the market economy (Hoskyns and Rai, 2016). This can be seen in the way in which our contemporary gross domestic product (GDP) calculations are made: social reproductive work is deemed to be outside the productive boundary that determines the value of the economy. Much has been written about the importance of the anomaly of excluding most of the work within the home as unproductive labour and its harmful effects (Waring, 1988; Picchio, 1992; Hoskyns and Rai, 2007; Fraser, 2017). Feminist political economists have argued that there is a simultaneous crisis of the economy and of reproduction that has its roots in the denial of the place of social reproduction in the economy and its commodification through the market (Elson, 2000; Fraser, 2016). They have also argued that the restructuring of states and markets is leading to a situation where the subsidy provided by social reproduction is being increasingly relied upon to fill the gaps in the state provision of welfare (Pearson, 1998; Elson, 2000; Folbre, 2001). Rai et al (2014) argue that in order to identify the
extent to which this is harmful, we need to measure the costs of social reproduction, which they term ‘depletion through social reproduction’.

Depletion through social reproduction is a specific kind of harm: it accrues at the level at which the resource outflows exceed resource inflows in carrying out social reproductive work over a threshold of sustainability (Rai et al, 2014). Depletion is experienced at different levels: by individuals involved in this work in terms of their health (both physical and mental), their sense of self and their entitlements; by the household and those who inhabit it in terms of the fabric of the household, the decrease in collective household resources (including the lack of leisure time spent together), the failure to manage the consequences of an increase in the number of household members engaged in wage labour and the reduction in support structures; and by the communities within which households and individuals live their lives, which would include the shrinking of spaces for community mobilisation as a result of a lack of time commitments from those mobilised into paid work. Rai et al (2014: 4) state that:

[The tipping point or threshold] at which depletion can be measured varies in the three sites. For example, for an individual the threshold could be specified as the point at which her or his stock of health deteriorates or falls below the commonly accepted measure of a minimum standard of physical and mental health as evidenced by variables such as blood pressure and other stress indicators.

Loss of employment or a significant expenditure without any increase in family income could deplete household resources; communities could be depleted during a process of mass migration, political violence or other crises during which performing social reproductive work becomes more difficult. Of course, the consequences of depletion at all these levels are not linear; rather, depletion in one site can and does affect the resources and possible depletion in other sites (Rai et al, 2014).

Harm can be of different kinds. Specifically, Rai et al (2014: 91–2) outline four kinds of harm attached to depletion:

(1) discursive harm that occurs through negating work in the domestic sector, while affirming gendered social hierarchies and distinctions of class and race … (2) emotional harm, for example, in the guilt associated with being a ‘working mother’ … (3) bodily and physical harm through neglect of the working body of those providing social reproductive labour, especially when access to health is not easily available to all and (4) harm to citizenship entitlements when groups (those providing social reproduction in this case) are constituted as ‘non-contributors’ to the economy; and therefore, although the recipients of its welfare, perhaps not entirely worthy of entitlements as citizens. (See also Morris, 2010)

Together, these can be seen as communities of harm, where harm affects not only the individual, but also the communities in which they are situated (Ní Aoláin, 2009: 219), with class, race and other vectors of exclusion affecting the strategies for addressing them. These harms also have ripple effects (Sankey, 2014), whereby members of communities and households suffer from lost opportunities to work, study, play and therefore live a good/better life.
Rai et al (2014) outline three strategies for the reversal of depletion: (1) mitigation provides individual routes out of depletion through buying in the labour of others to offset outflows; (2) replenishment involves state and non-state support for social reproduction – law and social policy can help in this, as can non-state collective approaches to reducing depletion; and (3) transformation requires fundamental shifts in the way in which social reproduction is recognised and accounted for, together with a redistribution of social reproductive labour. The articles in this themed section address all three of these strategies for reversing depletion and also discuss their limitations.

The themed section explores the possibilities and limits of legal and political approaches to harm at local, national and international levels, and also pushes us not only to critique, but also to think through, what a feminist approach to the law addressing harm and compensation for depletion through social reproduction might look like. In law, Feinberg (1987: 36) suggests, ‘only setbacks of interests that are wrongs, and wrongs that are setbacks to interest, are to count as harms’. The concept of interests is, of course, we would argue, a gendered concept; it is not one that can be taken for granted. In liberal jurisprudence, interests are regarded as both ‘a person’s more ultimate goals and aspirations’ and ‘interests in the continuance … of one’s life’ (Feinberg, 1987: 37). This continuance of life, we argue, is what feminists have called ‘social reproduction’ – it is the reproduction of life itself. Therefore, any action that undermines, marginalises and neglects the work that goes into this continuance and reproduction of life is harmful. Furthermore, as Rescher has argued, these interests make a chain that is imbricated in and cannot be unpicked without weakening the whole: ‘there are few, if any trade-offs operative here’ (quoted in Feinberg, 1987: 37).

The feminist critiques of law assist in understanding why the complexities of caring work and the depletion that may result from it are often absent in the law (Smart, 1989). Feminists have also argued that legal norms have fixed the notion of harm in ways that illustrate a propensity towards masculine rather than feminine experiences (Ní Aoláin, 2009). The traditional legal subject, like capitalism’s economic subject, is seen as an autonomous and enabled citizen. The social reproductive labour on whose supports this person depends is usually invisible, while, at the same time, assumed (Fineman, 2004). For example, while the law dealing with civil wrongs leading to harm or loss (tort law) is focused on the duties of care that people owe to each other, it avoids acknowledging some of the key relationships that underpin this care in determining the legal scope of such duties (Conaghan, 2003; Steele, 2012).

Feminist legal scholarship has challenged the invisibility of care, arguing for it to be recognised and compensated (Conaghan, 2003). Feminist work in international law and in the context of post-conflict transition has also challenged traditional legal conceptions of harm and compensation (Charlesworth et al, 1991; MacKinnon, 2006). This has alerted us to ‘subsistence harms’ – deprivations of subsistence needs as a discrete form of violence (Sankey, 2014). The feminist legal project is thus both a critical one directed at exposing the gendered assumptions underlying law, and an attempt to rethink and remake law in pursuit of a better world (Lacey, 2004).
Arguments: depletion, the law and social policy

Several connected and clear themes emerge from the articles in this themed section that develop the arguments about the importance of recognising social reproduction and its depletion effects, and provide insights into how these may be addressed at a multi-scalar level and in interdisciplinary ways. As Plomien and Schwartz (this issue) point out in their article, ‘the intensified pressure on the sphere of social reproduction through marketisation, individualisation and the retrenchment of state support (Bakker, 2007; Fraser, 2016) increases the demand for, but lowers the capacity to engage in, social reproductive labour’. Under conditions of globalisation and neoliberalism, there is growing strain on people providing social reproductive labour as well as paid care work that is usually invisible in law and social policy, and is leading to ongoing and new forms of depletion (migrants, health workers and carers, communities affected by business malpractices, and so on). What the articles show is that even as the neoliberal project fails, its effect on how the mitigation of depletion may be attempted is profound. As the feminist global care chain literature shows, the mitigation of depletion through buying in the labour of others intensifies the depletion of the weakest down the care chain – the poor, migrant women who join the care chain at the lower ends (Yeates, 2009; see also Mahon, this issue). Politically, this can also result in the revival of the discourse of mothering that supports the withdrawal of women from the labour market, even as austerity policies push more and more women into employment (Rubery, 2013). Often, the racialised engagement of the state with the issue of social reproduction leads to government policies ‘clearly intended to dissuade “undesirable” migrants from having children’ and blaming women for not bringing up obedient, neoliberal families; for example, the discursive harm through labelling poor households as ‘troubled families’ is visible in the UK (Lonergan, 2015; Nunn and Tepe-Belfrage, 2017). In terms of those providing care, the depleting effects on children’s education, friendships and aspirations are considerable. For women, issues of health, vulnerability to violence and individualised strategies of mitigation take the place of a state-supported framework. What is made invisible through these discursive moves is social reproductive labour, including that of children in conditions of poverty, as well as neoliberal policy frameworks at the local and regional levels (see Grugel et al, this issue; Plomien and Schwartz, this issue). Working through a lens of depletion allows this themed section to shine a light on the costs of social reproduction and think through the importance of valuing this work. As Federici (2004: 9) suggests, this non- or misrecognition itself reflects ‘a new round of primitive accumulation’ based upon ‘a rationalization of social reproduction aimed at destroying the last vestiges of communal property and community relations’. We ask and address the following question: can states better regulate global capital to ensure that social reproduction and the work that goes into maintaining life does not lead to increased depletion through a focus on economic growth?

Robin West (1997: 96) has observed that much more effort has gone into the business of deploying law as an instrument for the redress of harm than into the more fundamental questions of what precisely harm entails and how we should know and recognise its manifestations. We have noted elsewhere that combining insights from political economy and law within a feminist frame can help develop an argument about compensation for social reproductive work to address the harm experienced by carers (Goldblatt and Rai, 2018). In the following, we introduce the readers to the arguments of the articles included in this themed section and demonstrate how
these come together to advance the feminist work on social reproduction, law and harm, both theoretically and empirically. As these articles show, social reproduction and its neglect are global issues that have material effects at local and national levels. Collectively, the themed section argues that global discourses of private and public, of productive and unproductive labour, and of economic and legal individuation all make for the continued neglect of social reproduction. Therefore, the remedies need to be multi-scalar, crossing North–South boundaries and spanning different socio-political landscapes. Each one of the four articles work at this cutting edge of the multi-scalar analysis of social reproduction, depletion, social policy and the law to develop their arguments.

In our article, ‘Remedying depletion through social reproduction: a critical engagement with the United Nations’ business and human rights framework’ (Goldblatt and Rai, this issue), we treat depletion as a multi-scalar harm, which arises not only in the context of conflict and disaster, but also from a range of exigencies that confront individuals, households and communities in their everyday experience. We critically discuss the recent recognition of unpaid care at the UN level in the Sustainable Development Goals, at the International Labour Organisation and in international human rights law. We use the idea of harm related to depletion to critically evaluate the work of UN human rights bodies dealing with business and human rights. We suggest that bringing in more relational ideas of harm that recognise social reproductive work and its depletion effects should inform improved international legal frameworks in relation to business and human rights. We note that this new focus is an opportunity to consider the multiple ways in which the costs of social reproduction, conceptualised as depletion through social reproduction, could be recognised and compensated for better. However, while valuable, improved compensatory responses are not enough; rather, transformative responses to depletion as a harm are needed.

The focus of feminist work on unpaid domestic work has largely been on adults – especially on women. If women disproportionately bear the burden of care and domestic work, children and adolescents also provide care (and unpaid domestic work more widely) to support their households – and sometimes to third-party households as well. Given the gendered distribution of this work, girl children are mobilised into this care work much more than boys: ‘Owing to discriminatory social norms and gender stereotypes regarding unpaid care and domestic work, there is often a high degree of intergenerational transfer of unpaid care work from women to children, in particular girls, rather than redistribution between women and men’ (UN, 2019: 31). However, boys also have significant presence in this landscape of care. Care work is thus a cross-generational and gendered labour. Yet, the provision of care and domestic work by children and adolescents has remained unrecognised and therefore under-researched, being largely limited to a few contexts and issues, such as young carers in the Global North and in a few HIV/AIDS-affected countries in sub-Saharan Africa, as well as child domestic workers. Few studies have tackled this issue by asking whether children and young people are ‘harmed’ in the process and, if so, what kind of harms they experience. In part, as with women, the concern has been not to treat children as victims and to underscore the importance of children’s participation in the adult world (see Luttrell, 2013). While recognising this contribution, in their article, ‘Depletion, intersectionality and the limits of social policy: child carers in Mexico City’, Grugel et al, (this issue) draw on a pilot project carried out in Mexico
by Susana Macias and Jean Grugel to explore the burden of care work experienced by children and young people, and the attitudes that surround their experiences. The article asks what ‘harm’ means in contexts where children and young people experience little in the way of choice in relation to the care work they carry out. They find that highly gendered and idealised notions of the family and childhood, as well as discourses of child labour globally, can prevent the state from responding to the needs of children who care.

Given the ageing demographic worldwide, the issue of global care chains is a critical one. In her article, ‘Redressing harms to migrant domestic workers: global and regional spaces’, Rianne Mahon (this issue) pursues a scalar shift from the national to the global regimes of migration, and what Safri and Graham (2010) have called ‘the global household’. Mahon’s article focuses on the (also often invisible) harms experienced by migrant care workers and those whom they have left behind. Not only are migrant domestic workers – the vast majority of whom are women – exposed to highly gendered precarious work in the countries of destination, but the very reasons for their decision to migrate are often linked to efforts to mitigate existing conditions at home. Although the remittances they send play a role in supporting those left behind, the latter – children, parents, spouses and communities – are also often subject to harms associated with depletion through social reproduction. The concept of depletion through social reproduction, Mahon argues, helps to make visible what gendered norms often render invisible: social reproduction is typically seen as women’s work. To reverse its effects, states in both countries of origin and destination can play a role in addressing the harms experienced by migrant domestic workers and those left behind. However, Mahon argues, it will take action on multiple scales – bilateral, regional and global – to enable the replenishment of their reproductive resources, not to mention the launching of measures that challenge the structural underpinnings of their protracted precarity. Mahon concludes that this needs to be done through national action and bilateral agreements that can be supplemented by various international conventions, as well as the work of multilateral organisations at the global and regional scales.

While Mahon focuses on the international routes of mitigation, Ania Plomien and Gregory Schwartz (this issue) focus on the failure of replenishment strategies in Europe and its effect on individual and household responses. In their article ‘Labour mobility in transnational Europe: between depletion, mitigation and citizenship entitlements harm’, they start from the premise that the sphere of social reproduction is subject to intensified pressures triggered by attempts to defer crisis tendencies in the sphere of production. Consequently, they argue, social reproduction is reconstituted by capitalist market relations penetrating the structures of everyday life, the responsibility for social reproduction is privatised and individualised, while the resources and capabilities of individuals or households to meet this responsibility are inadequately supported. They focus on the European Union (EU) and the intrinsically linked crisis of capitalist production and social reproduction, and argue that the specific character of depletion is determined by the particular dynamics of social reproduction. This, they argue, instigates a range of legal, policy and practical responses by the EU and nation states, as well as by individuals, households and communities. By analysing the interconnected mobilities of labour between Ukraine, Poland and the UK in the sectors of care provision, food production and housing construction, Plomien
and Schwartz argue that mitigation (expressed through labour mobility) is currently the dominant mode within the EU and its periphery through which depletion is staved off at the household level. However, these responses are partial, uneven and unsustainable, as their case of labour mobility as a strategy demonstrates.

**Future research**

In the various articles of this themed section, we notice that despite growing international recognition of the burden of unpaid care on women and the need to treat paid caring work as equivalent to other forms of work, changing dominant gendered legal and political norms remains difficult. This is because international legal frames – themselves not robust enough – are yet to filter down to the state level, and even where they do, social change often lags far behind law reform if implementation and enforcement are poor. Disrupting the legal categorisation of harms by feminists is a valuable challenge to the dominance of law; however, unless such reframing is fully grounded in women’s experience, it will not represent their lived reality. In addition, without grounded struggles to challenge these imposed notions of harm in the context of neoliberalism, the law and state policy is unlikely to easily cede much ground on these issues. For example, Ratna Kapur (2018) argues that human rights have been deployed to advance dominant political and cultural interests rather than bring about freedom for disenfranchised groups. However, social and economic pressures, alongside political challenges, may (and sometimes do) impact on the nature and shape of caring. As we have written elsewhere in the context of a 2016 legal judgment by the South African High Court (Gauteng Local Division) in the case of Nkala and Others v. Harmony Gold Mining Company Limited and Others, although there was no direct legal compensation for the care labour of family members, the law did recognise this social reproduction as labour and acknowledged its depleting effects on the family members of the affected worker, with some legal consequences (Goldblatt and Rai, 2018). At the international level too, we see some signs of making visible the contribution of social reproduction to the economy (Sepulveda Carmona, 2013; Razavi and Turquet, 2016; Rai et al, 2019; UN, 2019; see also Goldblatt and Rai, this issue; Plomien and Schwartz, this issue). However, this recognition has yet to be integrated into macroeconomic policies and measures of economic growth. The law continues to deal in binaries of the public and private, demarcating and policing these boundaries. The project to challenge law in its definition of harm and its compensatory responses is emerging more clearly in relation to social reproduction and its depletion impacts (Goldblatt and Rai, this issue) but still requires further theorising and application to new contexts.

One area that we feel needs more work is that of post facto and anticipatory harm. This themed section asks: can feminist critiques of law allow us to take into account (gendered) harm done and compensation for this post facto? In the context of the climate emergency and the urgency of climate change, and knowing the harmful costs of unrecognised and unpaid social reproduction, we could (and perhaps should) also ask whether and how the law might address anticipatory harm, that is, harm being done even before it is manifested. The displacement of many peoples because of climate change and its other severe impacts, such as through drought, produce a crisis of social reproduction that intensifies the depletion of those doing this work (see Lingham and Johnston, 2019; Rai et al, 2019). The depletion that has occurred
needs to be remedied; depletion that can occur needs to be prevented. The law is usually better at taking account of harm post facto than it is in anticipating harm. This is particularly the case in terms of accounting for the depleting effects of anxiety about disappearing worlds through environmental devastation.

This brings us to a second related area that needs further attention. Rai et al (2014) built on the work of environmental statisticians, who have also suggested that the environment is depleted through extractive and other forms of exploitation, and that this depletion is not counted in our understanding and accounting of economic growth, but needs to be through debiting the cost of environmental depletion from growth measures. However, they did not connect the two ideas of depletion – of the environment and through social reproduction – in their analysis. We need to fill this gap: how can we recognise the depletion of the environment together with depletion through social reproduction? Economies that threaten the environment also threaten the habitats and lives of individuals, households and communities. The depletion of both humans and the environment thus subsidises economic growth through the unaccounted-for harm that is inflicted and absorbed by human subjects and the environment. How can we understand depletion through social reproduction by recognising the pain of such devastation of our world?

We need to open up the field of law to the pressing issues of the costs of social reproduction, which has largely been discussed within international political economy frameworks, and to enliven the scholarship on social reproduction with further examination of the role of law. If we do so, we will also be able to attend to the reshaping of the social policy landscape at local, national and international levels. The plea here, then, is for an expansive approach to the urgent issue of social reproduction and to reversing its depletion effects conceptually, discursively and in terms of pragmatic social policy.

What we have argued in this introduction, and collectively in the themed section as a whole, is for the need to place social reproduction and its costs at centre stage in legal and policy analyses, decisions and frameworks. What we also wish to emphasise is the interconnectedness of the law, social policy and political discourses at a multi-scalar level; international institutions affect global discourses, which, in turn, often frame domestic social policies. Currently, too many people who are engaged in this work are being kept out of view, with their value unrecognised, their entitlements undermined and their subjectivities denied because of this neglect of social reproduction. In conditions of crises – economic, social, political and increasingly climatic – the overlooking of social reproduction and its costs as depletion and harm can only further entrench gendered inequalities. Transformation is feasible, but for that, we need to not pass the costs of social reproduction down the care chain – through migration or intergenerational distribution. Instead, we need a redistribution of this work within households between men and women, and an insistence on the development of social infrastructure that supports social reproduction. The law, policy and political campaigns can all help with this transformative agenda through, first, recognising depletion and then collectively ensuring its reversal.

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Author biographies
Shirin M. Rai is Professor in the Department of Politics and International Studies and the Director of the Warwick Interdisciplinary Research Centre for International Development at the University of Warwick, UK. Her latest book (with Carole Spary) is *Performing representation: Women members in the Indian Parliament* (OUP, 2019).

Beth Goldblatt is Professor in Faculty of Law of the University of Technology Sydney, Australia, Honorary Professor in the School of Law of the University of the Witwatersrand.

Conflict of interest
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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