



# Care and Work Matter: A Social Sustainability Approach

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## 1. Introduction

While focusing primarily on gender equality, UN Social Development Goal (SDG) 5 is interlinked with, and has profound implications for, all SDG goals. As UN Women states:

Women and girls, everywhere, must have equal rights and opportunity, and be able to live free of violence and discrimination. Women's equality and empowerment is one of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, but also integral to all dimensions of inclusive and sustainable development. In short, all the SDGs depend on the achievement of Goal 5. (UN Women 2020b)

According to the UN, reaching gender equality by 2030 requires urgent action to eliminate all the different kinds of discrimination that continue to restrain women's rights in both private and public spheres (UN Economic and Social Council 2019). These discriminations range from gender-based violence, child marriages, and restrictions in sexual and reproductive rights, to limited access to positions of power in political spheres and working life. Gender equality and women's empowerment are thus central to the fulfilment of all SDGs.

Furthermore, gender inequalities—as well as other types of discrimination—persist; moreover, they are often obscured by societal expectations related to gender, age, generation and care, in families and households, and paid work, employment and workplaces: in short, work–family life relations. In this way, many economic, social and political discriminations and inequalities are founded upon inequalities around gender, care and work. Importantly, the home, family and household are both a place of unpaid work and care—as in unpaid domestic activities, childcare, care for old people and dependents, and indeed agricultural, industrial and family business work—and for some a place of paid work and employment, as in home-based work for money. Additionally, for some social groupings, such as old people and people with disabilities supported with care services, their home becomes a workplace for professional carers and other workers, often not under their control. Care not only signifies *caring about* someone or something in a general sense, but also involves

*caring for* someone or something in a material and practical way (see Tronto 1993), and thus often involves work, as represented in the notion of *care work*, along with freedom from violence and the threat of violence.

Feminist scholarship has demonstrated how care is a central category for analysis of societies, states and welfare states (Tronto 1993; Pfau-Effinger 2005), with intersections between state, market, and family. Unpaid care and domestic work are unequally distributed: women on average do about 2.6 times these kinds of work than men do, in terms of time use (UN Economic and Social Council 2017). This hinders women's participation in working and political life, and restricts their economic independence at a given point in time, and cumulatively later in life. A more gender-equal, global re-distribution of work that addresses questions of work and care for men, women and further genders is undoubtedly needed (Littig and Griessler 2005, p. 72). Thus, this chapter examines these issues of care and work, in terms of the central importance of care itself, and the relations of care, work, family and life, through a social sustainability approach, which considers the ability of society to maintain its demands for production and reproduction given its current means, all of which presently are intensely gendered.

## **2. Social Sustainability**

These questions of the relations of care, work, family and life are usefully approached through social sustainability, one of the three pillars of sustainability, along with environmental and economic sustainability (WCED 1987; UN 1992). Regarding analytical and theoretical underpinnings, the social dimension of sustainability has been described as the least clear of the three aspects of sustainable development (Lehtonen 2004; Littig and Griessler 2005). Social sustainability comprises both: (i) the sustainability of people in terms of health, knowledge, skills and motivation, sometimes referred to as 'human capital'; and (ii) the sustainability of institutions where 'human capital' can be maintained and developed (or not), also referred to as 'social capital' (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Putnam 1995; Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998; Woolcock and Narayan 2000).

Social sustainability is further defined as a 'quality of societies', signifying different kinds of relations of nature and society mediated by work and gendered relations more generally within society (see Littig and Griessler 2005, p. 72). The social and the societal aspects of social sustainability are often blurred, incorporating political (institutions), cultural (cultural practices and social orders, moral concepts and religion) and local sustainability (Hearn 2014), including, for example, the quality of communal, family, household and marriage relations (Ahmed 2008). Separating

the economic from the social, and assuming economy can be detached from social context, have been critiqued (Lehtonen 2004), for example, in terms of the possibilities for and extent of poverty alleviation (Ahmed 2014). Work, paid or unpaid, and care are central to sustainable development in terms of production and reproduction (Littig and Griessler 2005).

### **3. Social Relations of Care and Work in Diverse Contexts**

The gendered social relations of care and work are one of the central questions in the intersections of working life, changing family and household forms, technological development and innovation, and demographic change. There is clearly a vast array of different family and household forms across the globe (Blofeld and Filgueira 2018). In some parts of the world, the supposedly traditional nuclear family of two heterosexual parents and children living together is in fact far from the norm, whether through the persistence of extended and communal family forms, the growth of single-person households, the level of separations and divorce, and of reconstituted and rainbow (LGBTIQ+) families, and the impacts of shorter- or longer-term migrations, such as when parents work elsewhere and send remittances, whilst grandparents, family members and neighbours care for children and each other. Global care chains are key parts of transnational relations of care and work (Yeates 2009; Orozco 2010), simultaneously enabling what may appear to be a more liberating and egalitarian situation for some, and yet reproducing inequalities for others.

Similarly, in terms of what is understood as work, there is a large spectrum of diversity across paid and unpaid work; for example, in some countries, work includes the daily drawing water from a well, whereas in others it might largely concern childcare or production line work. According to UN Women (2020a), women are especially strongly represented in informal work, making up as much as 95 percent in South Asia and 89 percent in Sub-Saharan Africa of those doing such informal work as street vendors, subsistence farmers, seasonal workers, domestic workers. As the International Labour Organization (ILO) explains:

In the world of paid work there is a continuum that runs from employed to underemployed to unemployed to discouraged workers. On another axis, we can distinguish workers by status of employment such as employer, employee (salaried and waged worker), own account, causal/temporary/informal, and unpaid family worker; there is yet another distinction in terms of the place of work between street, home-based, or formal place of work. In the world of unpaid work, there exist differences

between the type of activity (subsistence production, direct care, indirect care, procurement of intermediate inputs) and location (home, private or common lands, public buildings) where the activity is performed, as well as who the direct individual beneficiaries are (household members, communities, institutions). (Antonopoulos 2009, p. 11)

In many parts of the world, (post-)industrial working life is intensifying, with the 24/7 economy, impacts of information and communication technologies (ICTs), and polarization between high unemployment for some and overwork for others. In many Western and post-industrial societies, there have been trends towards increasing labour market participation of women, more dual-career relationships, and demographic change through ageing and an ageing workforce. Some regions have seen de-development and emiseration of large populations, often concentrated in urban locations and megacities. Major aged, gendered emigrations have affected some areas, for example, parts of Central and East Europe, with severe implications for gendered, ethnicized/racialized care and the care economy in locations both with and without net immigration.

The prevailing strong emphasis on employed work in many societies, perhaps especially in post-industrial societies but also elsewhere, has brought increasing discussions around the sustainability of these changing working life patterns. Even between Western countries, there are significant differences in care ideologies with different levels of more familialistic and de-familialistic contexts. This means different welfare state models and societal views on who should provide care: the family, the state or the market? Different regimes of care can be distinguished, in terms of public and private care regimes (cf. Strell and Duncan 2001; Pfau-Effinger 2005). Previous research has shown connections between different welfare state models, gender contracts and expectations for policies for reconciling work with care responsibilities (Lewis and Smithson 2001) or their existence (Lyness and Kropf 2005; den Dulk 2001), with observed differences depending on socio-political contexts. In societies with more equal gender contracts and/or strong welfare state models, women are likely to participate more fully and more equally in the labour market and, at the same time, these employed women are more likely to feel more entitled to flexible policies to reconcile work with care responsibilities. It has also been shown that having more female superiors in organizations tends to enhance the organizational culture in terms of reconciling work with care responsibilities (Lyness and Kropf 2005). Furthermore, young adults in different welfare state contexts accustomed to different gender contracts probably have different expectations regarding divisions of labour at work and at home. Likewise, knowing about other contexts, for example,

more egalitarian contexts, may also affect the expectations of young adults in these respects (Lewis and Smithson 2001).

The context of state and corporate policies is certainly an important element in the social relations of care and work, and thus of social sustainability. The primary influences on the development of state and corporate level policies for reconciling work with care responsibilities for children include the national legal and cultural context, the level of the state influence in the family sphere, the level of female employment, and the gendered form of the social divisions of care (cf. Esping-Andersen 1990; den Dulk 2001; Lewis and Smithson 2001; Lyness and Kropf 2005). Gender-egalitarian policies on work and care may include, or even converge with, family policies, as feminism is often associated with initiatives for shared responsibilities between spouses. For example, equality policies that aim to encourage greater participation of men in family life and caring responsibilities, and greater participation of women in employment, have been strong in the Nordic region and some other parts of Europe, in contrast to those societies where there is low state or communal support for more equality in care or where a 'housewife culture' has persisted. However, even where the political context broadly promotes equality, this by no means equates with more thoroughgoing realization of gender equality throughout society, and thus indeed social, or societal, sustainability.

In the Anglophone world, the development of family-friendly policies has been largely corporate led (Scheibl and Dex 1998), whereas in the Nordic countries, development has been state led. Even with state-level policies and initiatives towards gender equality and family-friendly work practices, birth rates have declined in many Western countries. Despite such policies, women do not necessarily feel that they can feasibly combine paid work and children (Hobson and Fahlén 2009). In most countries, there is greater reliance on organization-specific policies rather than national legislation. For example, in the United States there is no legal right to take paid leave for care work and maternity leave specifically is limited to a twelve-week period of unpaid leave, a provision largely inaccessible for lower-class women or those in unstable occupations (Berger and Waldfogel 2003). In this context, new policies such as the National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) for Fiscal Year 2020, which recently provided all federal employees twelve weeks of paid parental leave following childbirth or adoption, are praised for their comprehensive coverage (National Defense 2020). While institutional requirements do improve the situation for a certain population, in this case approximately two million US federal workers, they lack the political empowerment or reliability of a national plan to compensate care work for the majority. The NDAA, similar to many organizational policies,

introduced a measure that would improve care work for its own employees. Yet, given the social and unequal nature of care work in modern society, it is clear that individual steps in the absence of a national standard have little effect on overall culture change.

Importantly, the societal organization of care, as in the private and public *mix* of care, has informed extensive debates and theorizations on gendered welfare (state) and care regime typologies (Anttonen and Sipilä 1996; Boje and Leira 2000). The concept of social care (Daly and Lewis 2000) engages with various complications, tensions and fragmentations in these relations between institutions and between domains that are sometimes dichotomized in the welfare regime literature, such as public and private, formal and informal, paid and unpaid, types of provision, cash and care services. Very often, care provisions are designed for non-migrant, heterosexual family forms; by having a broader focus on social care, many everyday situations of, for example, migrant and LGBTIQ+ families, are made more visible. This visibility, in turn, leads to more nuanced policies on behalf of federal governments and employers which provide greater equality and social sustainability for all workers.

Moreover, in some countries, institutional changes have brought significant shifts in the state of citizenship in relation to care:

The borders demarcating differences in care regimes have become less distinct in retrenched welfare states, as reflected in two processes signaling a weakening of social citizenship rights. First, the expansion of private markets in care services, sustained by low-waged migrant labor that has been occurring across welfare regime types (Hobson et al. 2018; Shire 2015; Williams 2017). The second is the shifting of care obligations back to family members (more often women), particularly for caring for the elderly (van den Broek and Dykstra 2016), generating a new concept in gendering of the welfare state lexicon, refamilialization (Saraceno and Keck 2011). (Hearn and Hobson 2020, p. 157)

Social care, seen as a broad approach to care, caring and care work, is one key building block of social sustainability, even with the complicating trends noted above. Importantly, the societal, and indeed transnational/trans-societal arrangement of social care needs to be considered as differentiated and intersectional, for both analytical and policy purposes. The diverse relations of individuals, families, groups and collectivities to, for example, citizenship, migration, location, and LGBTIQ+, and their associated rights or lack of rights, all relate to the general analytical concept of social sustainability, the development of just legal and policy processes and outcomes, and how these matters are experienced and enacted across time and space.

For example, LGBTIQ+ people may not have equal access to citizenship, migration possibilities, asylum, and thus in turn social care provisions. In addition, policy development and reform necessarily depend on both broad consistent governance frameworks, as well as how implementation works in detail on the ground.

#### 4. Care, Time and Life Stages

Care is gendered (Tronto 1993; McKie et al. 2008). In many contexts, women are still seen as the primary caretakers (Acker 1990; Hochschild 1989, 1997), and globally women carry most care responsibilities in households. The differences between the time allocated by men and women in unpaid and paid work are indeed truly amazing, with huge policy and practical implications for gender equality (Swiebel 1999; Fälth and Blackden 2009). One way of representing this is by considering the amount of time, daily or annually in hours and minutes, spent by women and men on unpaid and paid work, where unpaid work is generally considered to comprise care work and household labour. Reliable data measurements on this are somewhat uneven across the world, for example in parts of what are sometimes referred to as the 'global South' or 'developing countries'. Estimates from UN Women (2020a) suggest that in 'developing countries' women complete an average of 5.09 hours paid work a day and 4.11 hours unpaid work, while the figures for men are 6.36 and 1.31, respectively. In so-called 'developed countries', comparable figures reported are 4.39 hours paid and 3.30 hours unpaid for women, and 5.42 and 1.54 for men, respectively. Table 1 reproduced the latest country figures for OECD countries, along with China, India and South Africa.

Even more telling is the ratio of time spent in *unpaid* to *paid* work for men and women (Table 2). For example, in Italy women report spending over twice as much time on unpaid work as paid work (2.30), whereas men report a quarter of that ratio (0.59), and while the Nordic countries are by no means totally egalitarian, the ratio for Sweden demonstrates the highest parity between the genders.

**Table 1.** Time spent in minutes daily in unpaid and paid work by women and men.  
Source: (OECD 2020).

Country	Time Spent in Unpaid Work		Time Spent in Paid Work	
	Men	Women	Men	Women
Australia	171.6	311.0	304.1	172.0
Austria	135.3	269.2	364.8	248.8
Belgium	144.2	237.3	273.7	199.2
Canada	148.1	223.7	340.5	268.3
Denmark	186.1	242.8	260.1	194.6
Estonia	160.2	249.2	264.1	244.9
Finland	157.5	235.8	248.6	209.9
France	134.9	224.0	235.1	175.4
Germany	150.4	242.3	289.5	205.5
Greece	95.1	259.5	274.3	184.5
Hungary	162.3	293.8	272.7	202.5
Ireland	129.2	296.1	343.9	197.1
Italy	130.7	306.3	220.8	133.1
Japan	40.8	224.3	451.8	271.5
Korea	49.0	215.0	419.0	269.4
Latvia	129.7	253.3	376.9	288.5
Lithuania	151.6	292.0	354.3	279.3
Luxembourg	121.1	239.6	330.0	238.9
Mexico	136.7	383.3	485.9	250.1
Netherlands	145.4	224.9	284.9	201.4
New Zealand	141.0	264.0	338.0	205.0
Norway	168.5	227.4	277.4	200.0
Poland	158.8	295.0	314.8	203.2
Portugal	96.3	328.2	372.3	231.3
Slovenia	166.5	286.2	299.8	234.2
Spain	145.9	289.1	236.2	166.8
Sweden	171.0	220.2	313.0	275.2
Turkey	67.6	305.0	358.3	133.9
United Kingdom	140.1	248.6	308.6	216.2
United States	145.8	244.0	336.9	243.4
OECD—Average	136.0	264.4	318.3	218.1
China (People’s Republic of)	91.0	234.0	390.0	291.0
<i>Non-OECD Economies</i>				
India	51.8	351.9	390.6	184.7
South Africa	102.9	249.6	294.2	195.0

**Table 2.** Ratio of time spent in unpaid work to time spent in paid work by women and men. Source: (OECD 2020).

Country	Men	Women
Australia	0.56	1.81
Austria	0.37	1.08
Belgium	0.53	1.19
Canada	0.43	0.83
Denmark	0.72	1.25
Estonia	0.61	1.02
Finland	0.63	1.12
France	0.57	1.28
Germany	0.52	1.18
Greece	0.35	1.41
Hungary	0.60	1.45
Ireland	0.38	1.50
Italy	0.59	2.30
Japan	0.09	0.83
Korea	0.12	0.80
Latvia	0.34	0.88
Lithuania	0.43	1.05
Luxembourg	0.37	1.00
Mexico	0.28	1.53
Netherlands	0.51	1.12
New Zealand	0.42	1.29
Norway	0.61	1.14
Poland	0.50	1.45
Portugal	0.26	1.42
Slovenia	0.56	1.22
Spain	0.62	1.73
Sweden	0.55	0.80
Turkey	0.19	2.28
United Kingdom	0.45	1.15
United States	0.43	1.00
OECD—Average	0.43	1.21
China (People’s Republic of)	0.23	0.80
<i>Non-OECD Economies</i>		
India	0.13	1.91
South Africa	0.35	1.28

As care is gendered, the distribution of care affects women's situations both in households and in labour markets at any given time, both in the present and over the course of life. This is especially important in relation to not only the gender pay gap, but also the even larger gender pension (and older age income) gap (European Commission 2014). Intersections of age, class, (dis)ability, gender, generation, ethnicity/racialization, sexuality and care are significant in understanding shifting life situations and life stages. This means that the broad figures for time use on paid and unpaid work, as in the tables above, are likely to vary much in terms of such intersections, for example, of gender and ethnicity/racialization, as well as with the intersections of gender at different life stages. For example, many people in their adult and middle years are caring for both their children and their elderly parents. They are often referred to as "the sandwich generation" (cf. Burke and Calvano 2017). This phase of care is very much gendered. In the intersections of gender and age, shifts in gender contracts in different societal and organizational contexts are relevant and show the dynamic nature of these relations (Krekula 2007). Studies of age and generation, and intersections of age, care and life stages, remain relatively neglected in many studies of working life, despite the extensive research on 'work-life balance' or 'work-life relations'. These latter approaches do concern the division of work and care, though sometimes only implicitly so, as care for women often represents the dominant part of life outside of paid work. In short, debate and policy on 'work-life balance' is also very centrally about production and reproduction in societies.

##### **5. 'Work-Life Balance': The Case of Care and Work in Post-Industrial Times**

To illustrate the relation between work and non-work, including family life and care, the constructs of 'work-life balance' or 'work-family reconciliation' are often used, even if these constructs have been widely criticized (cf. Lewis 2003; Lewis et al. 2007; Pringle and Mallon 2003; Greenhaus and Powell 2006; Reiter 2007; Kalliath and Brough 2008). They continue to be used for scrutinising the relations of paid work and home, or non-work, as separable gendered domains in time and place, despite the blurring of boundaries across those interfaces (Clark 2000; Lewis 2003). Previous research has concluded the definitions of work and life to be "slippery and shifting" (Pringle and Mallon 2003). From a historical perspective, whereas the division of (two) separate domains was developed in the industrializing era (ibid.), in the present post-industrial 'knowledge work economy,' which increasingly provides flexible employment with regard to location and work hours, the traditional concept of a workday is slowly eroding (cf. Lewis 2003).

One of the major characteristics of knowledge work is a strong blurring of the boundaries between work and 'life', or 'non-work', or 'family-time' (Kossek and Lautsch 2012; McDonald et al. 2013; Moen et al. 2013; Lewis 2003; Ashforth et al. 2000). Relatively little is still known about the effects of the blurring boundaries on individuals, organizations and societies. With the blurring of boundaries, in many cases in dual career families, the core question of combining paid work with care responsibilities remains the same. Indeed, managing to combine paid work with care responsibilities does not necessarily mean that an adequate balance between them is found (Crompton and Lyonette 2006).

Previous research and critical commentary has concluded that the concept and policy framing of 'work-life balance' is itself a way of constructing the reality and acknowledging the widespread need to prevent paid work from invading too much into people's individual and family lives (Lewis et al. 2007). Yet, it is said to reproduce the deeply gendered debate about managing the combination of paid work and care responsibilities (Lewis 2003; Lewis et al. 2007). On the other hand, some research suggests that highly educated women are more prone to find the demands of (early) mothering unsettling but claim that this has more to do with demands targeted towards them from their work organizations, presented as historically masculine subjects not being especially interested in the reproductive function of their female employees (Hollway 2015).

Within neoliberal developments, knowledge-intensive work has become increasingly scattered and boundaryless (Roper et al. 2010; Pringle and Mallon 2003; Bailyn and Fletcher 2002). Yet the related work-life balance discourses are seemingly gender neutral, accepting the values of dominant neoliberal forms of capitalism, thus, ignoring structural, cultural and gendered constraints at workplaces and in societies more generally (Lewis et al. 2007). The 'long hours' working culture remains strong and often unchallenged, and the expectations of the 'ideal worker' today increasingly include both men and women. Thus, work may appear, superficially at least, more gender-neutral, even if it is not (Guillaume and Pochic 2009). In line with the neoliberal tendencies (Harvey 2005), employers seem to be scrutinized into non-gendered individuals as productive workers. Family still seems to have a greater impact on women's careers than on men's, as women more often accommodate their careers with family, whereas men have more freedom to prioritize work over family and care responsibilities (Hearn et al. 2016; Jyrkinen et al. 2017; Valcour and Tolbert 2003). Therefore, even if steps towards gender equality are taken in many societies, care in relation to work seems to be as downplayed as ever. This is despite the strong increase of women in the labour market in many societies, especially

in post-industrial societies. Post-industrial work is supposedly less burdensome, for example, through new technologies and automation, than work done during previous historical periods; yet, in its boundarylessness, post-industrial work invades private spheres and becomes burdening and stressful in other ways, which in turn takes away time and focus away from care and caring. To see reproduction and care as crucial parts of individual and collective long-term productivity is essential for social sustainability.

## **6. Concluding Comments: Towards Increased Social Sustainability?**

The social relations of care and work, of reproduction and production, of social care and care work, represent some of the most fundamental aspects of gender relations in society (O'Brien 1981; Orloff 1993). They underpin many wider and intersectional inequalities and discriminations. This chapter has highlighted the central importance of care and care work, in individuals, families, communities and workplaces, and in relation to work and working life. Even if some steps are taken towards gender equality, many unequal structures remain. If care work, formal and informal, paid and unpaid, does not receive the recognition and respect it deserves, and if production and reproduction are not seen as more equally important, a deficit in willingness to engage in policy development around reproduction and care is likely to occur. Furthermore, without the necessary policy development, care work will remain the domain of the marginalized. It is important to emphasize that when this work is uncompensated, this marginalization is furthered by economic insecurity. These questions, though crucially dependent on local and national context, increasingly need to be understood transnationally, even whilst the actual delivery of care is immediate and embodied. More gender-equal, socially sustainable ways of distributing care and work—paid and unpaid work, formal and informal, and thus removing obstacles to education and entrance to working life, as well as career advancement for girls and women—are vitally important steps towards a socially sustainable, gender-equal future.

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