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Who cares? How the UN's approach to the work of caring undermines the family and promotes a micromanagerial state

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INTRODUCTION

Care for others, especially children, the elderly, the disabled, and those who are sick or injured, is an essential part of familial and societal life. All persons, at various points in their lives, experience dependency, and much of the work of care takes place in an informal, unpaid context. The fact that the majority of such work is done by women is seen by feminists, including those who work in the context of the United Nations, as inherently problematic. They call for the redistribution of care within the home and for more women to work in the formal economy as a way to achieve gender equality. However, the solutions they present are in many ways worse than the "problem" they seek to solve. This *Definitions* examines the treatment of care within the UN system and considers whether the policy prescriptions it promotes would actually improve the status of women in society and in the family.

Care and policy

Care work can be paid and unpaid, and it can also be classified as direct or indirect

Given the ubiquity and necessity of care in any society, it is unsurprising that governments would take an interest in how it is provided, both as a matter of study and as a potential target for specific policies. At the multilateral level, the United Nations has explored the topic of care, often referred to as "care work," as it pertains to economic concerns, such as poverty reduction, as well as how it relates to human rights. Care work can be paid and unpaid, and it can also be classified as direct or indirect; a 2024 UN policy paper on "transforming

care systems" in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) differentiated between "direct care for people (physical, emotional, psychological and developmental) as well as indirect care (e.g. household tasks, including collecting water and firewood, travelling and transport), taking place within and outside the home."[1]

The paper on "transforming care systems" cites data from UN Women and the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) reporting that globally, more than three quarters of unpaid care work is done by women and girls and states that "investments in care policies, services, jobs and infrastructure are required to recognize, reduce and redistribute unpaid care and domestic work."[2]

These three "R's" were set out in a 2008 seminar for the United Nations Development Programme by British feminist economist Diane Elson, who argued in a 2017 paper on the same topic that "[t]he gender wage gap will persist, and women's rights will not be fulfilled, unless the gender gap in unpaid care and domestic work is recognized and closed."[3] The International Labour Organization later expanded this framework to 5 R's, adding "Reward and Represent paid care work by promoting decent work for care workers and guaranteeing their representation, social dialogue and collective bargaining."[4] This paper will focus primarily on the unpaid sector of care work, but it is impossible to do so without noting the ways in which the work of care can shift from one sector to the other, and the role that laws and policies may play in determining how these shifts occur.

At the heart of any policy prescription are two things: a descriptive view of the situation as it currently exists and a prescriptive vision of how it *ought* to be. Poverty reduction and the achievement of gender parity are key elements of UN policy in all areas, including the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and both of these have important implications for the UN's approach to care work. What is less emphasized, but nevertheless grounded in the UN's founding documents, is the importance of supporting the family as the bedrock of society. This analysis will explore how the UN's policy prescriptions relating to care work can have the effect —both intended and unintended—of undermining the institution of the family, where so much of the unpaid but essential work of care is conducted.

The natural and fundamental unit of society

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for better or for worse. Unless it is carefully crafted with an eye toward supporting the family as an institution, it may cause unintended harm, and if it is designed to fundamentally redesign the family to align with a progressive, humanist worldview, it will result in highly intentional harm.

According to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), the family is the "natural and fundamental group unit of society and entitled to protection by society and the State."[5] While human rights are usually considered as belonging to individuals, the family unit is also characterized as a rights-holder, not because it is beneficial to society or associated with economic prosperity, peace, or any other positive outcome, but because it is "natural and fundamental."[6]

Within the UN system, the family has become an increasingly contentious topic. At a fundamental level, the UN deals with national governments, both in terms of how they relate to each other and what they owe to their own citizens. With regard to human rights, UN policy deals with people as individual rights holders, and is generally more accustomed to grouping them in terms of specific or "intersecting" grounds of oppression than thinking of them in terms of their membership within families. Indeed, relationships between family members are often addressed in presumptively hostile or distrustful ways in UN human rights discourse, including by championing an outsized version of child rights and an attenuated version of parental rights and by insisting on women's and girls' rights to obtain "reproductive health" services without the consent or knowledge of spouses or parents. Even the definition of the family as set forth in the UDHR has become increasingly contentious as activists attempt to redefine it entirely.[7]

With regard to care work and the family, one key question is whether the primary responsibility for providing it belongs to the family or the state.

With regard to care work and the family, one key question is whether the primary responsibility for providing it belongs to the family or the state. Certainly, the state has an interest in ensuring that it is provided where needed, but does it function as a backstop or safety net for when families cannot deliver it sufficiently, or does it delegate that responsibility to families at its own discretion? In 2013, the UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Magdalena Sepúlveda Carmona, focused her annual report on unpaid care work. "When the State fails to adequately regulate, fund or provide care, the burden shifts to families who have to make their own arrangements,"[8] she wrote, suggesting that, in her view, the state holds primary responsibility in this area and that it is the family, instead, that is the backstop.

In the 2024 UN report on "transforming care systems," the

following thesis is set forth on how to value care and those who provide it:

> "This paper envisions a society in which care is at the centre of thriving, sustainable and just economies; where care is seen as a public good and as skilled and essential work that is critical to social and economic well-being; and where care is recognized as the basis for equal participation and treatment in society and not reduced to a commodity, a personal choice or a family obligation."[9]

This sets forth a clear contrast: on the one hand a positive framing of care as a "public good" carried out by "skilled" workers undoubtedly hired after undergoing a state-prescribed certification process and thus worthy of recognition. On the other hand, the notion of care as something one might choose or undertake as a family obligation is a state to which it would have to be "reduced."

With this in mind, let us examine the implications of the "3Rs" framework of unpaid care work that has been embraced by multiple parts of the UN system.

Recognition of unpaid care work

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"Recognizing" unpaid care work presents a challenge for those who view the world in a strictly economic sense, as it does not involve the exchange of money. This is not to say that it has no economic value—while estimates vary, the International Labour Organization (ILO) estimated in 2018 that it accounted for 2 to over 40 percent of the global gross domestic product (GDP), with a median value of 10 percent. Paid care work, which is also disproportionately done by women, is also a significant contributor to the economy, accounting for 11.5% of global employment.[10]

If a lack of recognition of unpaid care work is a problem to be solved, there are multiple options available. While the way the GDP is calculated does not currently account for this work, estimates like that of the ILO can at least present it in comparable terms. Advocacy efforts within the UN system and elsewhere have called for alternatives to the GDP to help account for things that it does not measure, such as unpaid care work, based on the principle that "what counts is what gets counted." All of these approaches, however, view the work of care through a reductive, strictly monetary lens. For those who are actively giving and receiving care, especially in the familial

and informal context, this framing might well seem absurd; these activities exist in an entirely separate "economy" of love, duty, friendship, reciprocity, and even self-sacrificial devotion to one's loved ones and one's God.

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In the reports of UN agencies, "recognition" of the amount and value of unpaid care work is often presented as an attempt to quantify the scale of a problem. A vast amount of care work, mostly done by women, is "invisible" and therefore, unappreciated—by economists, at least, if not by those receiving the care. The hours spent doing this work are seen as a net loss to the formal economy, and in particular, to women who could be spending them earning a paycheck. As for those who require care, they could still receive it, but from a paid care worker.

Illustrative of this approach is the "Together We Care" partnership launched in 2024 by the Ford Foundation and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID). The main focus of the initiative is to ensure that community care workers, which are often underpaid, receive better compensation and working conditions. However, as a representative of USAID said in an interview with Devex, "investing in systems that provide quality, paid care … that allows women, in particular, to be able to leave their homes and engage in other types of economic activity — it's just huge."[11]

Some are skeptical of the positioning of "recognition" of unpaid care within the 3Rs framework. At an event at the UN Commission at the Status of Women in 2019, Caroline Höglund of the National Association of Stay-At-Home Parents (HARO) from Sweden said "If we only think of it as something that needs to be reduced or redistributed, of course we will not value it." She noted that she could be paid to take care of her neighbor's children while paying someone else to take care of hers, "but if I were to take care of my own three children myself…it would not be valued. The general opinion would be that I did not contribute to society."[12]

Ultimately, care work is devalued not only by lack of recognition in economic indicators, but also by the devaluation of the particular and unique relationships within which it often occurs.

Reduction of unpaid care work

As with "recognition," the "reduction" of unpaid care work can mean several things. Certainly, there are ways to make domestic care work less time-consuming and physically burdensome, and roles for governments to play in making them more widely

available. Basic physical infrastructure like good roads and reliable utilities like clean water and electricity benefit many aspects of life, including care work, and enable the use of appliances such as clean stoves and washing machines that provide further efficiency in performing household tasks. They would also contribute to good community health and the provision of medical care, especially in low-resource settings where basic electricity and sanitation are unreliable and deaths and serious illness and injury from highly preventable causes remain high, including many maternal and child deaths.

Obviously, not all aspects of care can be reduced by technological and infrastructure improvements

Obviously, not all aspects of care can be reduced by technological and infrastructure improvements, and those that can are mainly the indirect types of care work. As the UN report on "transforming care systems" says in an explanatory footnote, "it is important to note that this policy area is related to reducing the time and intensity of arduous indirect and non-people care tasks. It should not lead to compromising or reducing care for care recipients."[13] In other words, indirect care work is far more easily reduced than direct care work.

In a similar way, the distinction between reducing the drudgery of certain tasks associated with care work and framing unpaid care work itself as drudgery can often be lost. The phrase "burden of unpaid care work" is often used in UN reports and events in the context of it being borne disproportionately by women. However, UN Women and UNDESA offered the observation that "framing care as a 'burden' should be avoided as it implies that all care work is a negative experience and that all care should be reduced."[14]

The UN report on "transforming care systems" offers three examples of "reduction policies in action," including a Cambodian program to reduce the cost of water for poor families and a Colombian initiative to provide laundry services in response to the lack of infrastructure in local homes. The third example is an Egyptian labor code provision that employers must provide childcare facilities for their female workers.[15] This "reduction policy" could be viewed in two ways. On the one hand, it could achieve an overall reduction in the total amount of hours per capita spent on childcare if the child-to-carer ratio is higher than if the children were looked after by their own parents. On the other hand, it represents a reduction in *unpaid* care work by transferring it to the *paid* sector. Meanwhile, the mothers are able to continue working for their employers, contributing to the formal economy in their own right. This raises the question of whether such policies can really be considered as "reductions" of

unpaid care work, or whether they are better described as a form of "redistribution."

Redistribution of unpaid care work

Redistribution, the third of the 3Rs is the most controversial

Redistribution, the third of the 3Rs, is the most controversial, as it has the most potential to impact the personal and intimate decisions made by individuals and families when caring for their loved ones. Redistribution is usually considered at two levels: between the family and the state and between individual members of the same family.

Within the academic literature on the subject of care work and the policies that relate to it, the terms "familialism" and "defamilialism" refer to the degree to which the responsibility of care predominantly rests with the family or the state. It is worth noting that familialism does not necessarily presume or advocate for the absence of state involvement or welfare structures. As social policy professor Ingrid Leitner notes, "we can distinguish between welfare regimes that rely on and actively support the family as the main source of care provision and welfare regimes that attempt to relieve the family from caring responsibilities."[16]

If we understand the family as the natural and fundamental group unit of society which precedes the existence of the state, it follows that the native location for care is within the home and, to the extent that the family is "relieved" from the duties of care by the state or by other actors in the marketplace, this is a form of outsourcing that should occur only at the discretion of the family.

State involvement in supporting families as primary care providers, like state involvement in any other area of life, often comes with its own incentives

However, state involvement in supporting families as primary care providers, like state involvement in any other area of life, often comes with its own incentives which may not align with those of families. This is particularly true when a feminist "gender lens" is applied.

Feminist scholars who advocated for the "defamilialization" of care work as a way to relieve women from unpaid work within the home observed that what tended to happen in practice was that this work was often transferred to other women who were paid, though often not very well. Where well-educated and relatively affluent mothers might outsource child care and domestic chores in order to pursue their careers, the ones tending their homes and children were often women of lower socioeconomic status, many of them immigrants. Paid or unpaid, care work was still largely women's work.

Even though most policies involving familial leave are written to be gender-neutral, such leave is disproportionately taken by women

In response, some progressives argued in favor of the "degenderization" of care through social policy: sociology professor Steven Saxonberg proposed that this be defined as "policies that promote the elimination of gender roles."[17] While feminist activists and certain experts and agencies within the UN are outspoken in favor of eliminating gender roles, translating this aspiration into policy is not easy or uncontroversial. Scholars have observed that "there are no examples of effective integration of women [into the formal economy], at an aggregate level, based on men's voluntary participation in care work."[18] Even though most policies involving familial leave are written to be gender-neutral, such leave is disproportionately taken by women due to a combination of practical and cultural factors.[19] Countries in the European Union (EU), which has committed to challenging traditional gender roles, remain "structurally gender-unequal" with persistent "sex asymmetries in the allocation of time to paid and unpaid work according to prescriptive gender roles," which some scholars argue constitutes "factual evidence that European societies, albeit embedded in changing gender cultures, unyieldingly attach men and women to essentialist responsibilities in the division of labour."[20]

The UN's vision for care work redistribution

The UN has prioritized "redistributing unpaid care work between households and the state, businesses and community, and between genders

Underpinning the call of UN agencies for the redistribution of unpaid care work is the fact that it primarily performed by women, coupled with the assumption that this is a problem. The UN has prioritized "redistributing unpaid care work between households and the state, businesses and community, and between genders,"[21] which implies a high level of governmental—and even multilateral—involvement in the most intimate aspects of people's lives, whether they want it or not.

What does this redistribution look like in practice? A paper from the UN Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment encourages countries to "foster social norms change to redistribute care from women to men and ensure that care is their equal right and responsibility."[22] To that end, the panel suggests "mainstreaming equal responsibility for care between men and women throughout the education system" and employing advertising and 'community-based behaviour change' campaigns as well as encouraging businesses to offer flexible policies to help people "balance work and family commitments."

According to UN Women, some countries – particularly Nordic

countries – have "earned a reputation for putting in place 'carrot and stick' parental leave policies that encourage fathers to take on more of the care for their children." If the father does not use his allotted share, "the leave will be lost to the family." However, UN Women notes that this type of more coercive approach is "not easily transferable to those developing countries where labour markets are extensively informal and where a small proportion of the workforce benefits from any kind of paid leave."[23]

However, in simple human terms, this would represent a transfer of one of the most crucial domains of the family—the raising of children—to the state.

While UN agencies may have ample motivation to micromanage the dynamics of household maintenance, they have relatively few 'carrots' or 'sticks' to deploy with regard to which parent takes out the trash, cleans the bathroom, or assists a child with his homework. The main target of redistribution, therefore, is not within the home, but between the family and the state. UN Women argues that "sustained investments in early childhood education and care services for children below compulsory school age […] could support both child development goals and provide alternatives to parental care, thereby facilitating women's labour force participation." Using Türkiye as an example, UN Women posits that expanding early childhood education and care would create as many as 700,000 new jobs (most of them going to women), and that most of the cost of doing this would be paid for by increased taxes on the income that would be generated.[24] This is characterized by UN Women as an "economic pay-off," but only 77 percent of the cost of these expanded services would be paid for by employee tax contributions, so the rest would have to be collected elsewhere, presumably by raising taxes in other areas. In terms of the GDP, this could look like a "pay-off" because of the creation of jobs and the transfer of a great deal of care work from the unpaid to the paid sector. However, in simple human terms, this would represent a transfer of one of the most crucial domains of the family—the raising of children—to the state. Women would still, presumably, be doing the childcare work, but for the children of strangers. Their compensation would be in the form of a paycheck, recognized and celebrated by those who have yet to develop an economic indicator to measure the kind of investment that parental love entails.

Carrots and sticks: the example of parental leave

What is being proposed by feminists seeking to abolish traditional gender roles is something that has never been accomplished in any society, including those that have adopted the most progressive positions in favor of such an outcome. In 2021, Spain became the only country in the EU to adopt a

A Spanish ambassador argued that the parental leave policy "has to be mandatory because otherwise the men would simply escape their responsibilities"

policy of equal and non-transferable parental leave, where the first six weeks are mandatory for both parents. Speaking at the launch of a report by UNFPA on declining birth rates, a Spanish ambassador argued that the parental leave policy "has to be mandatory because otherwise the men would simply escape their responsibilities."[25]

The United Kingdom instituted a "shared parental leave" policy in 2015 which was written in gender-neutral terms. Very few fathers (5% in 2019-2020) took advantage of the "shared parental pay" provision, which was attributed by many to the pay being too low for the higher-earning parent—often the father—to take it without a financial cost to the family.[26] Others worried that it might "put pressure on high earning women to return to work sooner than they'd like" or "undermine breastfeeding rates."[27] Jane van Zyl, CEO of the charity Working Families, argued that "only a well-paid, non-transferable allocation of leave can address the lack of financial incentive eroding the policy's effectiveness."[28]

All of this raises the question: what effect is the policy meant to have? If the goal is to enable greater flexibility for new parents to decide for themselves how to allocate care within the family, it would seem to be an improvement on the previous policy which presumed the mother would be the primary caregiver. For the growing minority of families where the mother is the higher earner or where the father's job affords greater flexibility, the benefits are obvious. However, if the goal of the policy is to redefine gender roles within the family, the Spanish approach would be preferable.

It should be noted that not all Spanish women, including feminists, supported the policy. A counter-movement advocating for "maternalist" feminism arose, arguing that longer breastfeeding is beneficial to children and that the path to achieving women's empowerment is not to impose artificial constraints on their rights as mothers.[29] While they were not successful in stopping the leave policy from being adopted in Spain, similar movements have arisen in other European countries. While they do not necessarily align themselves with traditional social conservative causes more broadly, and may embrace the feminist label, they share conservative groups' concerns about the harms of heavy-handed overreach by the state into the private sphere of the family, particularly where the care of children is concerned.

Obviously, the use of parental leave as a cudgel to redistribute care work within the home is only possible in a context where parental leave exists at all, which is predominantly in highly

developed countries that have a robust social safety net. Caroline Höglund of HARO is aware of how Nordic countries like Sweden are often held up in the international context as models of prosperity and respect for human rights, with generous government-subsidized benefits.

The childcare system in Sweden started as a "widening of choices" but "now it is the only acceptable choice"

Nevertheless, she visits the UN to warn those living in other contexts that these things can come with a downside. Speaking to the American Enterprise Institute in the U.S., she said that the childcare system in Sweden started as a "widening of choices" but "now it is the only acceptable choice." While she acknowledged that it is still legally a choice, not a mandate, she noted that "several proposals have come up recently of mandatory childcare," and many people feel that due to the social pressure, "they never even think of it as a choice at all." In the past, Sweden had offered a home care allowance to care for children aged 1-3, after parental leave expired, but this allowance was removed in 2016 because "it was not considered gender equal" as it was mainly taken by women.[30]

Taken all together, the practical effect of the "carrot and stick" approach to parental leave and childcare in the home is that fathers who stay home to care for their children are celebrated and rewarded, while women who desire to care for their own are denied support.

The straitjacket of gender parity

In the context of the UN, the preeminent indicator of gender equality is gender parity.

In the context of the UN, the preeminent indicator of gender equality is gender parity. Where parity does not exist, and where men appear to predominate in positions that confer political or institutional power and economic advantage, it is automatically assumed that this is a problem to be addressed, even if there is no evidence of direct and intentional discrimination or equal desire for such positions between men and women. If there are more interested and qualified male applicants for certain roles, gender parity can be enforced with quotas.

This analysis is evident in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), specifically goal 5 on gender equality. Target 5.4 is to "recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate." Its attached indicator is to measure the "proportion of time spent on unpaid domestic and care work, by sex, age and location." The indicator does not set a benchmark for what the proportion ought to be, and the target includes language on national sovereignty.

However, the resulting sex-disaggregated data on time spent on care work is used by UN agencies to promote more heavy-handed approaches than were agreed to in the SDGs.

Similarly, target 5.5 to "ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision-making in political, economic and public life" uses proportional representation as its indicators.[31] In this way, countries that manage to wield "carrots and sticks" — and quotas— effectively will perform better on these goals, irrespective of how their female (and male) citizens envision empowerment for themselves.

As countries develop and undergo demographic and economic transformations, they must make important choices with regard to the types of social welfare they enact, and how they measure success

Paradoxically, it is those countries with the most robust welfare states—the most "developed" countries by UN measures—that have the greatest leverage to enact the redistribution and "degenderization" of care work envisioned by the SDGs. Yet as countries develop and undergo demographic and economic transformations, they must make important choices with regard to the types of social welfare they enact, and how they measure success.

It is worth considering some of the arguments feminists have made against traditional gender roles and structures of care. In particular, they express concern about how a life spent providing unpaid care can leave women with few options following divorce or widowhood, especially if they are not well educated and have not worked extensively in the formal economy.

It is true that in certain traditional cultures, where the family is expected to be the primary social safety net, people can fall through the cracks when those structures fail. The destitution of widows, particularly childless widows, is something the state has an interest in preventing or reducing through its laws and policies. Examples might include a widows' pension scheme or reforms to inheritance laws. Such policies can be designed not to disrupt the traditional family structure, but to provide assistance in those places where it is insufficient to protect vulnerable or isolated people from poverty, and to provide reassurance that choosing to care for one's family is in fact recognized by the state and worthy of being rewarded.

It would also be possible to build on the idea of recognition of unpaid care work and intentionally craft social security policies to provide credits to at-home caregivers. This would not only acknowledge the value of unpaid care work, but also make the case for its retention rather than reduction.

The "caregiver state"

Moving care work from the unpaid to the paid sector and from the household to the state will inevitably have the effect of exacerbating individualization and atomization in societies that are already increasingly suffering from loneliness and isolation. This is not a simple cause-and-effect relationship; in a globalized and highly interconnected world, people frequently move away from their places of origin and the traditional extended family structures that provided networks of care are becoming increasingly rare. In response to global trends of fewer births and aging populations, the 2024 report of the UN Secretary-General on the thirtieth anniversary of the International Year of the Family said:

> "Prioritizing the development and effective implementation of social security and social pension systems to cater to the care and support of older people as traditional family support and its pool of unpaid family caregivers gradually decreases with the decline in fertility is recommended."[32]

It is true that the loss of these traditional structures, coupled with extended longevity and smaller family sizes, may necessitate additional methods for providing care, particularly to elderly, sick, and disabled persons. In such cases, policies by the state with regard to the provision of care are operating in response to the existing reality of human isolation. In other cases, the state itself plays a role in increasing that isolation by interspersing itself between the individual and his or her family and positioning itself as the presumptive source of care.

In 2012, U.S. President Barack Obama's re-election campaign website featured a narrative about the "Life of Julia," a fictitious cartoon woman whose life is enhanced at every stage by government intervention, starting with a government-subsidized preschool program. It was criticized and lampooned by voices from both the political left and right—Jill Lepore at the New Yorker called it "a mess; it's got the verisimilitude of a string of paper dolls."[33] Writing in the *Pepperdine Policy Review*, Caleb Jasso notes that Julia operates as the "perfect autonomous individual" and is "freed from things considered old-fashioned societal constraints, like a traditional family, spouse, church, or local community – all of which now become secondary to the state, the entity with which she has her most meaningful interactions."[34]

None of this is to suggest that the state does not have an important role in supporting both individuals and families.

The UDHR explicitly calls on states to protect the family

Indeed, the UDHR explicitly calls on states to protect the family, yet this concern is consistently overridden by UN agencies' commitment to eliminating gender gaps at every level. Therefore, the relationships between members of a family are often painted as competitive rather than collaborative.

CONCLUSION

While the language in SDG5 and target 5.4 could be used to lay the groundwork for arguments in favor of redistributing care work on the basis of sex, it does not explicitly call for that, and contains the crucial caveat "as nationally appropriate." However, in recent years, the "3R" language has become standard in UN resolutions, and it has repeatedly appeared in the agreed conclusions of the Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) since 2014.[35]

The following formulation has appeared in several recent outcome documents of the CSW:

> "The Commission stresses the need to recognize and adopt measures to reduce and redistribute the disproportionate share of unpaid care and domestic work by promoting the equal sharing of responsibilities between women and men within the household…"[36]

This language could be replaced with verbatim text from SDG5.4, which would be less coercive and consistent with previously agreed language about care work, including from the landmark 1995 Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action, for example:

> "The Commission stresses the need to fully recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies, and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family, as agreed in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development."

The rationale for this substitution is simple: it strikes the right balance between personal choice and social protection. To say "reduce and redistribute" implies that the government can commandeer the decisions of women (and men). Moreover, it is essential to insist on recognition of unpaid care and domestic work, in order to value women and men who decide to spend more time engaged in care work at home.

According to Elson, who first proposed the 3Rs framework for unpaid care work, "[r]ight-wing commentators see these activities as a private matter, reducible to individual private choices, rather than shaped by social and economic structures, and having implications for wider society, not just the people providing and receiving care."[37] However, these are not competing propositions; it is possible to envision care work as presumptively private and subject to individual choices and choices made within a family while also recognizing its broader societal implications. If nothing else, it behooves conservatives to consider these matters because there are powerful entities, including within international institutions like the UN, that are intent on micromanaging the private enclaves where care is given, not for pay, but for care itself. It is not a repudiation of those who work in the formal care sector to point out that there is no one with a greater personal investment in the overall wellbeing of the young, the elderly, the disabled, and the infirm than those connected to them by ties stronger than a paycheck.

Even at its best, the state should be a caregiver of last resort

Similarly, even at its best, the state should be a caregiver of last resort, not the first and best provider that displaces families from providing the care that they want to. For national governments to fulfill the UDHR's call to support and protect the family as the natural and fundamental group unit of society, they should first see where families might need assistance to care for one another, on their terms.

Care within the home, or unpaid care work, if you will, is the glue that knits the family, and therefore, society, together. While it may be difficult to adequately recognize its value in figures like GDP, it is nevertheless possible—and imperative—that it not be wielded by nations (or the United Nations) to undermine the institution of the family as part of an attempt to radically redistribute power and control—to themselves.

Endnotes

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