

INVISIBLE BUT INDISPENSABLE

UNPAID WORK AT THE HEART OF OUR ECONOMIES

“Can’t afford to pay your housekeeper anymore? Marry her! Then she’ll do it for free.” So goes an old economics joke. Economic and political analyses have long neglected the reality that serves as the punchline of this joke: throughout history, unpaid, socially useful and invisible forms of work – most often carried out by women relegated to domestic and care work – form part of the backbone of what keeps our society functioning.

Although men increasingly take on some domestic and care work, the balance is still tremendously skewed and we see women taking on waged work while retaining most – if not all – of the domestic and caring responsibilities. When both paid and unpaid work such as household chores and childcare are taken into account, women work an average of 30 minutes a day longer than men in developed countries and 50 minutes longer in developing countries.¹ While this gap may not seem huge, the fact that the vast majority of men’s working hours are paid, whilst a very significant number of women’s working hours are not, is crucial. Among the many resulting inequalities stemming from less paid work for women is a serious discrepancy in pensions. For example, in 2014, European women received pensions 40.2 per cent lower than those of men, despite working more.²

Bobby Kennedy was right in 1968 when he declared that GDP measures “everything except that which is worthwhile.” The Western economic model – focused around GDP and growth – fails to recognise the unpaid work without which it would collapse. As scholars have argued, the post-war period of the so-called ‘golden age’ of Fordism

1 United Nations (2015). Work. *The World’s Women 2015. Trends and Statistics*. bit.ly/2qOokZf

2 Martina Prpic (March 2017). Maternity, paternity and parental leave in the EU. European Parliamentary Research Service. bit.ly/2K0SAc3

– plentiful full-time jobs, suburban housing, and extensive social welfare – was dependent not only on women’s unpaid labour but also on the resources and the cheap labour of the rest of the world. This idea has apparently yet to permeate progressive politics.

How can we move forward in Europe when so much of the work that has sustained society is barely recognised and greatly undervalued? The European Union may consider itself one of the most progressive parts of the world when it comes to rectifying gender inequality, yet for the millions of Europeans performing unpaid care and domestic work – work that the United Nations’ Sustainable Development Goals call for states to recognise – this satisfaction rings false. Greens have long been advocates of recognising this type of work, moving beyond the limitations of GDP, and re-orientating our economy around a different idea of growth.

The political debate on work cannot afford to ignore these questions any longer. Greens need to lead the way in placing unpaid, socially useful and often invisible work firmly in its rightful place at the centre of discussions around the future of work. The *Green European Journal* asked politicians and experts from five countries around Europe – Spain, Croatia, Belgium, Finland, and Austria – about how this issue plays out in their country, which policies are already in place, and how deepening our understanding can help us create a more equal future.

SPAIN

ROSA MARTÍNEZ RODRÍGUEZ

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: What is the place of unpaid domestic work in Spain?

ROSA MARTÍNEZ: Women are the main providers of care work and domestic work, even when they are in paid employment. Even those with a job do almost double the hours of care work that men do. Women take 92 per cent of unpaid leave in Spain to look after relatives; they are the ones who stop working to look after their families. Unpaid care work is equivalent to 45 per cent of Spain’s GDP. If the system had to pay for this work, it would collapse.

What practical steps should politicians and progressives take to include this issue in the ‘future of work’ discussion?

ROSA MARTÍNEZ: It’s important to talk about sharing the responsibility for this type of work – not only with men but among the whole of society. Here in Spain, we need to invest in public and social services, especially education and health. In 2006, Spain passed the dependents’ law which gave people financial support to pay for their daily care, whether provided by a professional carer or family member. Individuals caring for their father, mother, or disabled children were able to be paid by social security. It created many jobs, recognising and professionalising that which

many women were doing for free within their families. However, with the austerity imposed by Spain's right-wing government, led by the Partido Popular, this measure was cut and Spain has seen a 'crisis of care'. As a result, more than 160 000 people caring for elderly or disabled relatives stopped receiving money from social security. One study suggests that keeping the law in place could have produced more than 600 000 jobs between 2010 and 2015.³

A first step would be to restore that law. Another would be to introduce free nursery care for children up to three years of age – it does exist but finding a place is a game of chance.

Another big question is how much of this work is done by migrant women. A walk through Spain's parks reveals many women from South America looking after children. This is the 'global care chain', in which women leave their own families to look after other people's children in Europe, often in a precarious situation, with bad pay and no papers. We need good regulation to protect them.

How do you see that relating to your own experience – as a mother and a politician?

ROSA MARTÍNEZ: I travel to the parliament in Madrid every week, leaving my children with

their father, and it gives me a feeling of guilt. Women have been told that our role in life is to be a good mother and that this means spending a lot of time at home. Men don't face the same expectation. This issue is at once personal and political. It's not just me; all women with children who want a professional career have to face this expectation and prejudice.

Women between 30 and 45 are missing from politics because they are raising their children.⁴ The most prominent European female politicians have no children – it seems that women still have to make a choice that men don't.

How has austerity affected the situation?

ROSA MARTÍNEZ: When governments withdraw social support, it is mostly women who are forced to step in and replace that service, often to the detriment of their own pensions, careers, time, and health. During the crisis, grandparents, especially grandmothers, kept families going, helping their unemployed children, cooking, and looking after their grandchildren. And there is no retirement; most women worked both inside and outside the home but only retire from the work outside the home. The resulting pay gap has important consequences, because if you stop working or you work part-time, as many women in Spain do, your pension is then lower.

³ Maryem Castillo (Sept. 2012). La Ley de Dependencia puede generar más de 600.000 empleos. *El País*. bit.ly/2vuHhpi

⁴ Campbell, R. & Childs, S. (Jan. 2014). This Ludicrous Obsession, Parents in Parliament: The Motherhood Trap. *Huffington Post*. bit.ly/2qLmRDE

CROATIA MARIJA ČAČIĆ

According to translator and activist Marija Čačić, Croatia's particular history has led to structures that, combined with cultural beliefs, produce serious inequality, with "almost 50 per cent of Croatians agreeing that a woman's main concern is her husband, children, and home."⁵

Post-Yugoslavian 'reforms' to healthcare systems, labour regulations, and pensions – imposed as conditions for EU accession or by the IMF and the World Bank – have had a particularly nefarious effect on women. "Since the scope of social services was lowered, overall women have a lower economic activity because of a larger burden of elder care and child care", she explains. As in other countries, 80 per cent of households have women doing all or almost all of the housework, and their pensions are much lower, leaving them at a higher risk of poverty.⁶ Poor reproductive healthcare services hit women's pockets: "women's health has been largely privatised and unavailable to women who are unemployed, poor, or live in rural areas. In bigger cities, a shortage of gynaecologists with contracts with the Croatian Health Insurance Institute means it's become normal to pay out of pocket for services usually covered by insurance."

Čačić adds that, "When it came to the widespread loss of jobs because of state-owned factories being privatised, as well as cuts in the public sector, women were usually the first to leave, since they could retire earlier than men." A 2014 Labour Act also made it easier to dismiss young mothers and pregnant women.

Recent measures haven't been successful. The so-called 'Law on Nannies' in 2013, which attempted to regulate black market childcare (about 10 000 women work illegally as nannies), only saw 23 women register.⁷ The 'Cash Grants for Parent Caregivers' scheme in Zagreb only led to further economic inactivity from women, according to experts, and did not remedy the lack of kindergartens.

Talking about care work in Croatia brings an international aspect into play. Many Croatian women leave to be carers in Western Europe, especially Austria, where the elderly care model means that they spend half their time working there and the other half in Croatia with their family. Yet "whilst their pay is better than here, it's still very low for such physically and emotionally hard work", she explains.

5 Zeljka Kamenov & Branka Galic (2011). Rodna ravnopravnost i diskriminacija u Hrvatskoj. bit.ly/2HUffGt

6 Ksenija Klasnić (2017). bit.ly/2K6lDDe

7 Zakon o dadiljama. Zakon.br. bit.ly/2HoWFcJ

BELGIUM ELISE DERMINE

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: How does Belgian law support types of work that aren't strictly traditional wage employment?

ELISE DERMINE: Although its main aim is to promote economic growth and waged employment on the labour market, Belgian labour law and social security law do also value and reward other types of work. Jobs in the non-profit sector are subsidised. Reduced social contributions for certain groups of unemployed people will bring into the purview of wage employment some socially useful activities that would not exist if left to the free interplay of labour and demand on the market. These types of activities in the cultural sector, in the healthcare sector, or in the social sector are not necessarily productive in the economic sense but are valued by society as a whole, which pays to ensure that they keep developing.

It's the same in the public sector: workers can do socially useful activities and be remunerated by the state, and thus reconcile their work life and private life. Belgian workers can take various types of leave to temporarily stop or go part-time without losing their job in order to look after a newborn or an ill relative, or to take some training. Often, during this leave, they receive financial support from the state. You can also take leave in case of taking political office, and to be a 'lay judge'.

How about for those who are not in work?

ELISE DERMINE: In terms of social security, unemployment benefits are dependent on job seekers actively looking for a job and being available on the market – so in a sense our social rights are geared towards putting people into employment. However, you can sometimes keep receiving these benefits whilst not actively looking for a job if you are starting studies, undergoing trainings, looking after your family, or doing voluntary work. You can also do artistic work that is (low) paid – this shows the state wants to support the development of cultural activity and understands that it's difficult to make a living as an artist.

But this system is not very developed, and since the late 1990s, politicians, encouraged by the EU, are leaning towards reducing this type of mechanism and re-orienting policies towards putting people back in work. The argument is that we need people in work to keep financing the welfare state, but the fact that we are returning to a stricter vision of what 'work' means, centred on productivity, doesn't fit with the reality that it's increasingly difficult to create new jobs.

Would a universal basic income help support these types of non-traditional employment?

ELISE DERMINE: Instead of giving everyone a basic income and renouncing the 'right to work', we should expand the idea of 'work' so

that people still have the right to work because this right also includes the idea of participating in society in a socially useful way and to be able – according to your current needs – to leave or come back to paid employment. What should change is that social rights shouldn't only recognise wage employment but enlarge the mechanisms that value other types of socially useful activities.

The danger of a basic income is creating a divide between those with a salary and those who are completely left behind without any mechanisms to get a job or participate in society. We risk confining women to the private sphere, for example.

FINLAND TARU ANTONEN

Whilst Finland is often regarded as one of the best countries for women, things are far from equal. “When it comes to unpaid work in the home, and care for elderly relatives, women do most of it, even if they are in paid employment. That’s been pretty stable for decades”, explains Taru Anttonen, researcher for Green think tank, Visio. Women take 90.5 per cent of parental leave.⁸ They are legally allowed four months and men nine weeks of paid parental leave, which is non-transferable (cannot be passed on to their spouse). And whilst most women take most of theirs, men

on average take slightly less than four weeks of their leave, and one fifth of men take none of it. The additional six months, which the parents can share out how they want, is also mostly taken by the mother. Women also mostly take the child allowance for staying at home and raising a child until their third birthday.

Many workplaces are not supportive of men's parental leave. Most don't hire a cover worker and assume it will be short. Of course, as men earn more than women, financial reasons also push mums to take the leave rather than their partners, as parental allowances are always lower than one's income. “At the core of this debate”, argues Anttonen, “is the cultural idea that the role of ‘caring’ is strongly female.”

“As Greens, we should be encouraging dads to be part of this caring, and workplaces to support them, because there are so many benefits – they would experience what it can give them, they would challenge stereotypes of men not being caring, and women would have more work opportunities”, reasons Anttonen. Evidence shows that cultural perceptions of what men and women should do start as early as pre-school. “We should have gender-sensitive early education that gives children multiple choices and doesn't guide them towards certain things, games, or behaviours according to their gender.”

⁸ Martina Prpic (March 2017). Maternity, paternity and parental leave in the EU. European Parliamentary Research Service. bit.ly/2K0SAc3

Whilst parental leave recently looked as if it was about to be equalised for men and women by the current government, internal disagreements between the ruling parties prevented any change. The current system means women can end up out of the labour market for 10 years, or more if they have more children, which jeopardises their career and leads to lower pensions.

Even when it is paid, the work of caring for others is very gendered and poorly remunerated. Jobs that are seen as ‘women’s work’ and that many women still do unpaid for their families – such as caring and cleaning – are some of the lowest paid, which also makes staying home more tempting for women. As Anttonen points out, “Male-dominated jobs such as construction, which require the same level, if not a lower level, of qualification are much better paid than the equivalent female-dominated professions.”

The jobs women have traditionally been limited to throughout history are either unpaid or low paid, suggesting that women’s labour and time is less highly valued than men’s. It is interesting to note that the only job done both inside and outside the home that is frequently highly paid is the male-dominated profession of chef, which even then has a significant gender pay gap of 28.3 per cent.⁹

AUSTRIA BIRGIT MEINHARD

GREEN EUROPEAN JOURNAL: What is the situation of family carers in Austria?

BIRGIT MEINHARD: I focus on what we call ‘care in secret’: the care work done by hundreds of thousands of family and child carers that is effectively invisible in society. In Austria, carers’ lives are often precarious, and though they do receive information about possible support, it is poorly understood and under-used.

Women make up 80 per cent of the 460 000 people receiving care allowances. The 30 per cent who are in paid work find that this care work, with its unpredictable hours, stress levels, and complexity, conflicts with their own professional activity. They are often forced to stop temporarily due to emergencies without knowing how long for – and may have to go part-time, or leave their jobs entirely.

Full or part-time care leave may not be sufficient for the entire care and support they have to provide. Those not in paid work, such as retired women, often come under great mental, physical, and financial strain. Carers are thus often thrust into precarious situations, both whilst they are still in employment and when they retire, and often find themselves

⁹ Andrew Chamberlain (Mar. 2016). Demystifying the Gender Pay Gap. Glassdoor. bit.ly/2KhgxvU

facing poverty – or near poverty – due to a reduced pension and the financial effect of this care work.

What's the effect on the economy?

BIRGIT MEINHARD: 80 per cent of people in need of care are looked after at home. The value of private care in Austria is 3 billion euros per year. These people save the government a huge amount of money – they should be supported.

As a Green politician yourself, what sort of changes do you think are necessary?

BIRGIT MEINHARD: Austria is currently dominated by political tendencies that want women out of the labour market and in the kitchen. Greens are fighting for recognition and change: the long-term care allowance must be adjusted for inflation every year; care and support work should be recognised as a duty of the state and supported through tax revenues; and care and part-time leave must be made a legal entitlement. The range of support options for those who need care must include everyday relief that is adapted to individual needs, rather than the current two extremes of either the short-term mobile service or 24-hour support. I and other Green city councillors have, with the support of other parties, submitted an initiative about child carers who, according to a study by the Ministry of Social Affairs, number at least 42 700. ■



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