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Why women deserve a four-day week

The pandemic has shown only too clearly: women are still doing far more unpaid work than men. A four-day week, however, could help shift the balance

This article almost didn't happen. I quite simply didn't have the time. As a mother of a toddler and a 20-week-old baby, and as a worker currently employed on a full-time basis, time is not on my side.

And it's time that forms the subject of this article – or more precisely, the recent resurgence of interest in reducing work time driven by experiences of furlough, short-time work and working from home during the coronavirus crisis.

Last month, Germany's largest trade union – IG Metall – proposed moving to a four-day week in an effort to protect jobs from the potential economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic. Rather than laying off workers in industrial jobs, it argued, companies should cut hours and offer some form of wage compensation instead.

Calls of this kind have been gaining traction across Europe. This year in Spain, the regional government of Valencia commissioned research into working time reduction strategies, stimulating considerable debate in the local, national and international press. Finland's new Prime Minister Sanna Marin has long been an advocate for working time reduction, and is exploring how hours in the workplace might be brought down nationally over the course of the next three years, without any reduction in wages. In the UK, meanwhile, the Trade Union Congress, which represents the majority of British trade unions, has similarly come out in favour of 'a four-day week with fair pay for all', and the Labour party included a pledge to move towards a 32-hour week over the course of a decade in its 2019 election manifesto.

Think tanks and campaigning groups such as Autonomy, the New Economics Foundation and the 4-Day Week Campaign have long pointed to the social and economic benefits associated with a cut in working time, from increased productivity and lower unemployment to the reduction of our carbon footprint. Beyond these general social goods,

however, all three organisations point to advantages for one specific constituency: women. Indeed, women are among the most obvious beneficiaries of any move to a four-day week given that, as a group, they are particularly 'time poor': in every European country men have more daily leisure time than women.

It would be an obvious mistake, though, to frame this gap purely in terms of the hours of waged work performed. After all, a free time deficit persists *despite* the fact that women are more frequently engaged in part-time work than men. In some cases, women are being forced to patchwork together various part-time roles in order to make ends meet. In general, however, temporal inequality also stems from the distribution of *un*waged labour.

Clocks, care and coronavirus: The 2020 and 2008 crises

The pandemic has brought this home only too clearly. As schools, nurseries, adult day care facilities and community centres for the elderly have been forced to close their doors, the forms of care that they usually offer have been forced back upon the family. Numerous studies indicate that the burden of unpaid care and household maintenance work created by Covid-19 is falling disproportionately on the shoulders of women. One report indicates that, regardless of their wage bracket, working women in the US, the UK and Germany did more childcare than men with similar earnings. A study from University College London found that women in the UK spent more than twice as much time as men on their children's development and home schooling during lockdown.

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But the coronavirus crisis did not create these temporal inequalities; rather, it exacerbated a pre-existing problem. Since the late 1970s, governments have withdrawn support for much of the care and maintenance work that goes into people's daily survival. This has particularly been the case after the crisis of 2008, with government support for services like childcare, healthcare, food stamps, housing, long-term care and eldercare all facing the chop. As the state stepped back, and markets frequently found these kinds of activities to be unprofitable, it was families (or, more precisely, mothers, daughters, sisters and other female relatives) who were expected to rise up to meet the

demand for care.

And women have indeed remained responsible for the bulk of unwaged care work, even as their hours in the waged workplace have increasingly caught up with men's. In fact, in every country in the world for which data are available, women spend more time than men on unwaged work – on average 3.3 times as much. Even in the most gender equal countries, like Norway and Denmark, women continue to do nearly one and a half times as much unwaged work as their male counterparts.

At this point, too little has been done to understand the organisation of unpaid care work within households that do not conform to a cis-gendered, heterosexual nuclear family model, or for those who find themselves estranged from any potential intrafamilial safety net. It seems safe to assume, however, that many members of these constituencies also suffer temporal injustice. Free time is a resource; we should push for its equitable distribution.

Four-day week as silver bullet?

The introduction of a four-day week, concentrating as it does upon the sphere of waged work, is unlikely to offer a single, direct solution to struggles in the domestic sphere or to transform the lives of those not currently employed full time. It is beholden upon us to link various strands of struggle together – to understand how home and work, waged and unwaged labour, bleed into and inform one another. This is something of which IG Metall is apparently well aware, having agreed a deal in 2018 to allow members to cut their working week to 28 hours for up to two years to care for children or other relatives.

Clearly, we don't want a situation where collective energy is targeted only at work as it is conventionally understood, leaving a massive (and highly gendered) sphere of drudgery untouched and implicitly naturalised. That being said, the opportunity to spend less time engaging in waged work, with no loss in income, would no doubt be particularly welcomed by those currently most depleted and exhausted by the delivery of unpaid care (namely, those who are not rich, white, male, healthy, able-bodied and dependent-free).

Therefore, the push for shorter working hours, crucial as it may be, needs to be seen as part of a wider fight for 'time for what we will' – a fight which incorporates the reduction and redistribution of both paid and unpaid work. It is to be hoped that, once people have a modicum more time to meet their basic needs and care for their loved ones and dependents, they will also have time to more fully participate in civic and

political life, to pursue personal interests and passions and to transform the relationships which underpin the current organisation of unpaid domestic labour.

As for me, I was fortunate enough to suffer a last minute bout of insomnia. As I write this, my partner and babies are safe and sound in their beds. If a four-day week *is* introduced in my lifetime, perhaps I'll be able to participate in these kinds of debates without losing any more sleep.



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