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Who Cares?

Unpaid care work, mostly performed by women, is hardly recognised as 'real work'. Tackling this structural disadvantage is long overdue

The pandemic has made it clear to everyone: care work, both paid and unpaid, is of systemic importance. We are all dependent on care at different times in our lives. It is therefore high time we stopped taking this work for granted and recognised its role in our own and society's well-being.

Care work is mainly done by women. Above all, it requires emotional intelligence, as a large part of care involves looking after and caring for others. But it also includes housework and cooking — everything that is necessary to fulfil a person's basic needs. However, unpaid care work in the private sphere is hardly recognised or perceived as 'real work'. A number of campaigns in recent years, for example #shareyourchaos on women's care and mental load, are working against this notion and are calling for a rethink: every form of work must be recognised — and rewarded accordingly.

This should be quite an obvious demand, especially if you look at various studies and surveys on time use: between their paid employment and unpaid care responsibilities, women literally work double shifts, while men find significantly more time for leisure and relaxation. However, women are systematically punished for this additional work in a society that only values and remunerates paid work.

Widening the gap

Care work therefore significantly contributes to existing gender inequalities. Due to care responsibilities towards children and (in-law) parents, women are much more likely to work part-time — in many countries with the active support of the state, which encourages this practice with tax incentives such as the *Ehegattensplitting* in Germany, which makes full-time work for the second spouse unattractive because net income ends up being the same as when working part-time. As a

result, women across the EU earn around 36.2 per cent less than men. This not only makes them more financially dependent during their working lives, but also in old age: the pension system shows that career breaks, for example for parental leave, are largely penalised in our society. The gender pension gap is currently 29.4 per cent across the EU and as high as 36.3 per cent in Germany. Therefore, women are significantly more likely to be affected by poverty in old age.

This situation is aggravated by the fact that paid care work – again mainly performed by women – is not adequately remunerated: the hourly wage for care workers in the EU is 21 per cent below the average. Women are therefore financially disadvantaged in every aspect of care work, while, at the same time, the need for such work is increasing due to, for example, demographic change.

Tackling this structural disadvantage is therefore long overdue — a fact that has slowly been recognised at the political level in recent years as well. An important framework for this at EU level is provided by the EU Gender Equality Strategy, which had already recognised and identified these connections before the Covid-19 pandemic, and the European Pillar of Social Rights, which sets out a roadmap for the EU's social agenda, including a focus on gender equality, good working conditions and pay, as well as the right to good long-term care and childcare.

Initial successes at EU-level

In this context, there has indeed been some initial success in recent years in anchoring gender equality and greater recognition of care work throughout the EU. An important step towards increased recognition of unpaid care work was the EU work-life balance directive. In order to promote social change towards a shared division of care work, the right to at least 10 days of paid paternity leave now applies throughout the EU. All EU citizens now also have the right to five days off work for the care of relatives. The slow implementation of this directive by the EU Member States, however – almost all countries did not implement the directive until after the legal deadline had expired – shows that this can only have been a first step.

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Paid care work will now also experience a revaluation through two additional EU directives. The new EU directive on adequate minimum wages, for example, stipulates that the minimum wage must correspond to 60 per cent of the median wage of an EU Member State or 50 per cent of the average wage from the end of

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this year. In Germany, this currently corresponds to a minimum wage of €14. This is a decisive step towards closing the gender pay gap, even beyond the care sector, as women are overrepresented in the low-wage sector. According to the European Commission's calculations, the gender pay gap can thus be reduced by up to 5 percentage points from its current level of 12.7 per cent. The additional requirement of greater collective bargaining on wage settings in the Member States also paves the way for stronger collective representation of interests in order to combat poor working conditions, for example in the care sector, in addition to wage levels.

The new EU directive on pay transparency opens another door to improving the status of paid care work. The directive not only provides for the right to information on the remuneration of colleagues and an obligation for medium-sized and larger companies to take action to reduce the gender pay gap in companies: through the 'hypothetical comparator', it includes a tool to compare wages across sectors in the future. This has created a legal basis for challenging low pay in the care sector, for example. It is an important instrument for greater gender equality, as long-term studies show that across all occupational fields, pay and working conditions deteriorate as the proportion of women increases and, in turn, improve as the proportion of men increases. Thanks to the EU directive, such developments no longer have to be tolerated.

However, in order for paid and unpaid care work to actually receive greater recognition and be given greater value, more needs to happen. The European Care Strategy sets the course for this by identifying a great need for action for the entire EU, particularly with regard to early childhood education and care (ECEC), as well as long-term care. The EU Member States have subsequently adopted common minimum standards in their Council conclusions: at least 45 per cent of children under the age of three should receive a childcare place, as well as at least 96 per cent of children from the age of three up to compulsory school age. With regard to long-term care, only the right to access to high-quality and affordable care was affirmed. It must still be recognised as a positive development, though, that the Member States have, for the first time, acknowledged the need for action in long-term care at EU level.

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How the EU Member States actually intend to achieve these common goals remains to be seen.

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The Care Strategy as well as the new voluntary commitments by national governments can only be a first step. They must now be followed by binding regulations that not only legally enshrine good working conditions and pay in paid care work, as well as the recognition and societal necessity of unpaid care work, but also take the necessary measures.

Whether paid or unpaid, care work as a basic prerequisite for our own and society's well-being must be recognised more and be equated with paid employment. It is unacceptable for women to spend their entire lives at a financial and social disadvantage for this labour. We cannot continue measuring success and value exclusively through paid work and economic growth. We need a roadmap towards a more just and equal society, a model that puts our needs and well-being at its centre: an EU Care Deal.



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