

Cherishing All Equally

Inequality and the Care Economy

1. Foreword

2. Report Introduction

- The crisis that currently besets the continent of Europe and, indeed, most of the world is the most profound in living memory. It is at once a public health, political, social, and an economic crisis. Its reach is long and its effects likely to be lasting. Our ability to travel, to socialise and, for most of us, to work have been drastically curtailed. Basic human needs are not being met, the long-term consequences of which will play out in the coming years.
- The **spread of COVID-19 in early 2020 constituted a sudden shock** to our way of life. **A less violent eruption, but with stakes no lower, has been bubbling below the surface for several years, centuries in fact.** The fight for gender justice has and is being waged on several fronts. It includes demands for political representation, cultural rights, and for access to and control over economic resources. Such demands have been growing in recent years. Many questions are raised by these demands, the answers to which are difficult.
- **One area where the current crisis meets gender inequalities is in the arena of care work.** Many forms of work have stopped, or are being increasingly done from home. **Care work, however, can never be suspended, and it cannot be online.** An essential component of care is that it requires human interaction and that it takes time. It cannot and should not be automated. **Care workers then are at the front line,** and have put their health and lives at risk for the sake of others. **Yet care work is often poorly paid and precarious, outside of the medical professions.**

Cherishing All Equally 2020:

inequality and the care economy



Edited by Robin Wilson

- **Just as paid care work gets little recognition, unpaid care work is even less celebrated.** Care work done in the domestic sphere takes many forms. It includes the care and raising of children, care of the disabled, and care of the elderly. It requires many ancillary activities to support direct care, such as the preparation of meals. **Domestic labour has a clear impact on the well-being of others, despite the lack of recognition it receives. Yet society is such that the more one focuses on domestic and care work, the less time one has for participation in political and economic life. It renders unpaid carers dependent on others for economic resources and political representation. But without care and domestic work, there can be no political and economic life.**
- The **solution** to such a conundrum seems clear – **more participation of women in economic and political life, and more participation of men in domestic and caring labour.** Indeed, in all EU countries women do more work than men when both paid and unpaid labour are considered. There is clearly scope for men to do more care. The converse is less obvious – equal representation of men and women in political life is obviously needed, but what about women doing more paid work? **Is an expansion of the female labour force participation rate, effectively making poor and working class women do more paid work, desirable in all countries? And if men and women have somewhat different preferences in terms of how they allocate their time, how should social policy then be designed?**
- **FEPS and TASC have partnered together to address some of these questions.** FEPS, *The Foundation for European Progressive Studies*, has been at the forefront in addressing questions of inequality at the EU level, including how to think about inequality between the sexes. TASC has done so similarly with much of its research focusing on Ireland. **The Irish system of care is quite different to the putative best in class examples of the Nordic countries, so it provides a contrast to the experiences of most other European countries.**

3. EU Chapter

- **So what is the relationship between inequality and the care economy? The first chapter addresses this question in the context of the EU.** It looks at how different systems of care provision generate economic inequalities between men and women. It also looks at **why care work tends to be poorly paid**, and **examines job quality of care work.** Finally, it looks at the **work-life**

preferences of men and women, and what policy interventions are needed to reconcile gender equality with balanced lives.

- **The relationship between care provision and the gender distribution of economic resources is complex.**
- **Countries with expansive, publicly-funded systems of care tend to have lower overall earnings differences between the sexes as more women are employed. However, the hourly difference in pay – the gender pay gap – tends to be higher in those countries as well, as care and public sector employment tend to be less well-paid.**
- **There are a variety of factors which lead care work to being poorly paid.** As a time- and labour-intensive face-to-face service it **does not lend itself to productivity increases, the basis for higher wages. So long as care is commodified, then, pay and conditions will be poor.**
- **Both men and women desire to do less paid work and devote more time to their families,** with men desiring to allocate more time to paid work than women. For desires for work-life balance to be realised to be reconciled with gender equality, a variety of interventions are necessary. For instance, **workplaces need to facilitate combining part-time work and care needs, so that time devoted to unpaid labour does not come at the expense of paid work.**

4. Irish Chapter

- **What makes the Irish example interesting is its reliance on unpaid care work.** No other country in Europe, it seems, is more reliant on unpaid labour than Ireland is. If unpaid labour is so important, does this come at the expense of valuing paid care work? And how does such a system perpetuate itself, and is it sustainable? These are the questions addressed in the second chapter, which looks at who Ireland's carers are and how they are valued.
- **The second chapter finds that Ireland devotes significant resources to facilitate its high levels of unpaid care work. Its welfare system is highly reliant on transfers and it invests comparatively little in services.**
- **Most of Ireland's unpaid care work is done by women, and lower income groups** do somewhat more as well.
- **With resources weighted toward transfers over services, less is invested in paid care work.** Unsurprisingly, then, the **pay and conditions of early years and adult care workers are low.**

- Despite this, **care services are often unaffordable**, which leads to **reliance on informal and migrant labour**. The **trend toward privatisation will do little to improve this**.
- To improve pay and conditions of care workers and to facilitate access to paid work for carers, **higher levels of public funding are necessary**.

5. Conclusion

- The picture emerging from this report are therefore multifaceted. Public provision of care helps alter the distribution of work in society and enables women to participate in economic and political life, though it does not eradicate the trade-off between time devoted to care and ability to participate in society outside of care. It provides women with economic autonomy but, in aggregate, increases the gender pay gap. Societies and workplaces must come to terms with these facts. It must facilitate families to both care and do paid work. It must also devote more resources so that paid care work actually pays. It is not clear what type of societies will emerge once the global pandemic is over. It is our hope that the recent attention care work has received is here to stay and that it at long last it begins to be properly valued.

Previous FEPS-TASC Reports

“Inequality and the top 10% in Europe” (2020)

https://www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/top_10-report-feps-tasc.pdf

“Cherishing All Equally 2019: Inequality in Europe and in Ireland” (2019)

<https://www.tasc.ie/assets/files/pdf/20190220114456.pdf>

“Precarious work, precarious lives: how policy can create more security” (2018)

<https://www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/1845-4%20precarious%20workers-web.pdf>

“Reducing Health Inequalities: The Role of Civil Society” (2019)

https://www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/tasc_health_inequalities_report_2019.pdf

“Health Inequalities in Europe: Setting the Stage for Progressive Policy Action” (2018)

<https://www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/1845-6%20health%20inequalities%20inner-hr.pdf>

“Living with Uncertainty: The Social Implications of Precarious Work” (2018)

https://www.feps-europe.eu/attachments/publications/feps%20tasc%20report_living%20with%20uncertainty_final.pdf