
Book Review

Hrzenjak, Majda (ed.). Politics of Care. Ljubljana: Peace Institute. 2011.

While conservative discourses about population decline and ageing society dominate the political agenda in many countries of the European Union, including Hungary, there is less dialogue about the unrecognized forms of care work which are almost exclusively carried out by women. The book 'Politics of Care', edited by Majda Hrzenjak, aims to shift attention to the wide array of care activities and the needs of different social groups that are affected by the care arrangements in societies, including local and migrant women, women from different class backgrounds, and the recipients of care services (children and the elderly).

In the introduction, Hrzenjak emphasizes the importance of applying a social justice approach when discussing care. She argues that, in order to organize care in such a way that it does not exclude care givers or care receivers from society, policy-makers need to have a social rights-based approach towards care. This approach involves securing labour rights for care givers and labour and social rights for both care givers and care receivers, and creating a system based on gender equality, in which women and men equally participate in care work. The social justice approach is thus based on the recognition of care work as both productive and indispensable in society, not marginal and derogatory.

The chapters of the book analyze the main perspectives of decision-makers regarding care work, the claims and needs of care givers and care receivers, and offer recommendations for a social care system that would recognize care activities and the rights of the citizens to care, labour, and social rights.

In the first chapter, Fiona Williams explains that there are two main approaches to care work in European politics: the social justice and the social investment approach. Williams argues that the social investment approach, which dominates care politics in the EU countries, fails to achieve the social integration of women, who, as family members or employees, perform the care activities. While the social investment approach seeks to integrate women into the labour market instead of the informal care activities they carry out as family members (mothers, grandmothers, daughters, etc.), the actual labour integration policies of this approach lead to the privatization of care activities and to the employment of informal care workers from lower classes, usually also migrants, in households for very low salaries. The social investment approach is based on the idea of increasing citizens' productivity and employability through taking parental leave, while the social justice approach conceptualizes care and a fair care regime for both care givers and receivers as citizenship rights. According to Williams, only through a shift from the social investment to the social justice approach could a fair organization of care activities be achieved in society. The social justice approach entails five major claims through

which such a just care organization can be created: “gender equality claims for work/care reconciliation policies”; “trade union support for flexible working”; “support for disabled people”; “recognition of unpaid carers”; “advocacy for transnational care workers” (Williams, 2011: 20). Williams argues that by fulfilling these claims, all care activities would be recognized and rewarded.

In the second chapter Elin Peterson comes to similar findings by comparing the care regime in Southern European and Nordic countries, focusing on Spain and Sweden. She argues that, while Nordic countries, even if governed by conservative parties, focus on gender equality in care activities, this claim is almost completely non-existent in the care policies of other European countries. She also concludes that in terms of the recognition of work/life balance struggles the Nordic “feminist welfare states” are very progressive. However, like Williams, she criticizes all European welfare states for not dealing with class differences and exploitative forms of care work.

In the third chapter, Haskova, Uhde and Pulkrabkova analyze the different ways NGOs frame care work and desirable care policies. They focus on four types of NGOs which advocate for social groups affected by the care regime: majority women’s NGOs; gender-conservative NGOs; NGOs advocating for migrants; and Roma people. The analysis shows that the only framework where there is a lot of shared understanding is the framework of redistribution, since all NGOs advocate for more state support for care activities. There is, however, no consensus in the case of the gender equality framework, since gender-conservative and Roma advocacy groups emphasize traditional family values instead of gender equality, while NGOs working with migrants do not concentrate on the issue of gender inequalities in relation to the social integration of migrant people.

In chapter four, Widding Isaksen and Stenum follow up on this intersectional approach by analyzing how the au pair system in Western European countries, initially established as a form of cultural exchange for young people, actually became a form of exploitative, underpaid work activity for migrant women. They emphasize the responsibility of trade unions and the ILO (International Labour Organization) to advocate for the often undocumented, underpaid migrant “au pairs” and for exploited workers, too, even though they are not formally hired through work contracts and therefore are not members of unions.

While the first part of the book concentrates on Southern, Western and Northern Europe, the fifth chapter, written by Hrzenjak and Humer, focuses on Slovenia, where informal, low-paid and unrecognized care work is not done by migrant care workers, like in Western Europe, but by local women. They argue that lower-class women and women who migrated to Slovenia from other post-Yugoslav countries during the war, and who are employed as care workers in the grey economy, face the same exploitative work conditions even though they did not migrate as care workers to Slovenia from poorer countries. Hrzenjak and Humer also emphasize that care work is not a homogenous activity, and while many women perceive it as

degrading and do it out of desperation, for a lot of women it is a meaningful job, one that cannot merely be reduced to housework, since it involves emotional labour as well.

The next two chapters also emphasize the complexity of care work that has to be taken into consideration by policy-makers. The sixth chapter, written by Kreimer, analyzes home-care schemes in Austria, where care work is subsidized through cash transfers to the care recipients. Due to the low value of these transfers, most families can only afford informal care workers, who are not trained care workers. Kreimer argues that a clear definition of what care work entails, including home help and medical help, as well as higher allowances paid to care receivers, would together secure a high quality of care and promote gender equality.

In the last chapter of the book, Lanoix argues that care work is organized on a Fordist basis in a post-Fordist (service- and knowledge-based) economy. Care workers are poorly paid and unrecognized, while care work is perceived as housework done by interchangeable, assembly-line workers. This regime ignores the emotional and relational labour that care work entails. According to Lanoix, recognizing the actual value in care work would be the first step towards resolving the “care crisis” (the tension between the issues of an ageing society, women’s integration into the labour market, and invisible, exploitative care work conditions).

“Politics of Care” provides a great insight into the dilemmas of care work in different parts of Europe, and the interrelations of the care, gender, and migration regimes, while it also highlights the importance of class and ethnic dynamics in the organization of care activities. The chapters address not only the responsibilities of the state in care politics, but also the responsibilities of other important social actors: the EU, local and international NGOs, and trade unions. They do not exclusively focus on welfare policies, but also deal with the political ideas about care, gender and class equality, and migration which frame those policies by recognizing or un-recognizing certain types of care and care givers.

The analyses offer many examples and explanations of why care policies without an intersectional understanding of care work and a social justice approach can fail both care givers, who do invisible or poorly paid work, and care receivers, who cannot afford care or receive low quality services.

Since there are numerous insights into care activities and care policies in different countries, there are also some contradictions and unanswered questions that remain unaddressed at the end of the book. Care work is a complex policy area, and a concluding chapter would have been very useful to address or at least pinpoint the dilemmas regarding care. In addition, based on the findings of all the chapters, it could have clarified exactly what kinds of policy the social justice approach should involve.

While all chapters emphasize that the now invisible, informal or poorly paid forms of care work should gain public recognition and that the redistribution of care work and resources should be more generous, there are no clear recommendations about what kinds of redistributive policy would provide more recognition. Kreimer argues that the allowances provided for care receivers to hire care workers should be more generous, while Williams and Peterson put more emphasis on more formal services being provided by the state instead of home-care workers being hired directly by care receivers.

It also remains unclear whether the social justice approach should entail the same elements in different European welfare states. In countries like Austria, Spain, the Czech Republic and Slovenia, care work is framed as an informal domestic activity for which family members are responsible, and people are reluctant to use state services. Meanwhile Nordic countries are more concerned about care and gender equality and the state's role in providing care services. Yet there are no clear answers in the book to the following questions: can privatized home care or direct subsidies to care receivers be part of a system of social justice approach towards care? What kinds of public service would such a system entail? Do all services need to be publicly provided without private partnerships? Overall, there are many questions about the redistribution and recognition of care that could have been addressed in a concluding chapter.

Moreover, there is also an unresolved policy dilemma about migrant work and care work in the chapters. While they all highlight the exploitative nature of the care work that migrant care workers do, they do not explain how both the care and migration regimes in European countries and in the countries of origin should be transformed in order to offer labour and social rights to migrant care workers. Widding Isaksen and Stenum emphasize the role of trade unions and ILO regarding the labour rights of migrant care workers. However, the fact that illegal care workers are exploited in the grey economy is to a large extent due to the migration regime. Stricter labour regulations therefore would not necessarily stop illegal migrant care work, but could lead to the stricter policing of illegal migrant workers.

To conclude, 'Politics of Care' provides a great insight into European policies affecting care work, a detailed critique of the dominant social investment approach towards care, and an outline of a social justice approach. It is an intersectional analysis of all aspects of care and all social groups involved in care politics. Some questions remain, however, about the systems of redistribution and the recognition of care, the specificities a regime based on the social justice approach would entail, and the contradictions of strict labour regulations and the migration regime – all questions that a concluding chapter could have addressed.