

FEMALE SLAVERY: CARE WORK AS AN INHERENT DUTY OF WOMEN

Data affirms that care work is usually left to women. This article will explore the similarities between care work today and any form of modern slavery.

According to a report released in 2020 by Oxfam Intermón, around 16 million people in Spain are working at least eight hours a day without receiving any financial compensation for it. From these unpaid hours, the vast majority are related to care work, which in turn, has been historically and culturally attributed to women.

This cultural conception, which categorizes care work as something inherently feminine, and which puts a great pressure in women to do not let down society by refusing to accept duties that 'should be seen as a gift', can be gathered as a way of modern slavery. But, why?

The term slavery, far from just referring to the action of owning somebody, also refers to a situation in which forced labor is in place, and for which the owner expresses no appreciation nor gives any financial acknowledgment. The term itself has already been associated with domestic duties

in gender literature, giving birth to the so-called 'female domestic slavery' term. However, care work slavery goes beyond domestic household duties. It embraces all kinds of care work -either provided to children, to elder or to disabled people-

While some might claim that our modern societies have left these inequalities behind, existing data on the subject confirms otherwise. Statistics from UN Women reveal that women carry out 2.5 times more unpaid care work than men on a global basis. When it comes to Spain, a 2008 Official Gazette stated that the percentage of unprofessional care work towards old people represented by women was that of 84%. Even if the figure might have gone down a bit in recent years, the Covid-19 health crisis has made it rise again, claims Ana Peláez, vice president of CERMI Mujeres.

This information exposes the yet existing inequality between men and women at becoming financially independent and at succeeding in their professional career. Given that women are culturally forced to carry out the care work, and that States seldom provide any support, women are more likely to devote less time to their paid jobs, leaving them often in a situation of financial precarity or of dissatisfaction.

The problem here is that care work itself is deeply undervalued. It is conceived as a natural human duty, while ignoring the huge contribution it makes to the world economy and to the well functioning of society. In the words of Kate Raworth, bestselling author of the book 'Doughnut Economics': "Without all that cooking, washing, nursing and sweeping, there would be no workers

-today or in the future- who were healthy, well-fed, and ready for work each morning". This unpaid work actually represents from 10 to 39% of the GDP of every country: work that constitutes a core element of any economy, and without which today's world evolution would not be conceived.

Now that we have seen the importance of care work, and that we have understood that its undervaluation is not just mistaken, but also a hindrance in the achievement of full equal rights for women; what can we do about it? According to María Ángeles Durán, the first woman to receive a Sociology National Award in Spain, there are only three options: either pay it, eliminate it or redistribute it. In her view, the best would be a combination of all of them.



When it comes to paying the care work done so that the hours that could be used for a paid job can be compensated, the State plays a leading role. Dependent people are not the ones to blame for the current inequality situation. They -children, old, disabled or ill people- are just as vulnerable as the person who is left with the job of caring for them, and therefore, are not able to economically compensate the offered services. In this sense, public institutions should take the lead.

In many countries, financial support to unpaid caregivers is not provided at all. In Spain, these social grants were not established until 2006, when the Dependency Bill 39/2006 was approved. The bill states that family members or other individuals carrying out non-professional care work towards a dependent person have the right to receive economic benefits from the State. However, civil organisations denounce that the amount purveyed is completely insufficient. Indeed, sociologist María Ángeles Durán calculated that in order to pay at least a considerable part of all those caring hours, the Individual Income Tax or IRPF would have to be raised by 70%.

Given the unlikeliness of such measure, what would seem fairer is that at least the caring is equally distributed between both sexes.

Not so long ago, legislation was pretty clear on pointing out women as the natural caregiver. One of the most popular legal cases in this field is the one that appears in the American movie 'On the Basis of Sex'. It narrates the story of how Ruth Bader Ginsburg left a precedent for similar gender-based discrimination scenarios, specially those regarding care work. The case itself consisted in defending a single man who had to care for his old mum. He struggled coping with both his job and his caring duties, and demanded the same tax

deduction that women in his same situation would be entitled to. This serves as a clear example of how needed equal treatment within law is to make care work not only partly paid, but also not only a women's thing anymore.

The same applies to maternity leaves. Only from January 2021, paid leave in the light of birth was equalised in Spain. Both mother and father are now entitled to 16 weeks of leave to take care of their new baby thanks to the 6/2019 Royal Decree-Law. This was aimed at fostering joint responsibility in the raising of children -a job traditionally and discriminatorily entrusted to women-, and at preventing companies from rejecting women with the pretext of not wanting to pay their possible maternity leave.

Nonetheless, and although these small measures can trigger a great change, they are not enough. Both giving benefits and trying to balance the profile of the caregivers get short on the ambition this social shift requires. So, what else could States implement that could really help women emancipate and leave behind their pre-established caring duties? Uruguay may have the answer.

In 2015, Uruguay approved the Care Bill nº19353. Unlike other bills, such as the Dependency Bill in Spain, this one does not try to mitigate the problem of female care work slavery, but it aims at eliminating the problem from its roots. The bill consisted in creating a whole public care scheme, so that unpaid and non-professional care work is not even a reality.

According to the bill, all children, old people and other kinds of dependent individuals must be granted attention by the State. This means that paid and professional workers will be the ones in charge of the caring if necessary, giving the job the respect and acknowledgment it really deserves,

allowing women to continue with their jobs full-time, and thus preventing them from falling into poverty.

While women in Uruguay devoted 2/3 of their time to unpaid care work and 1/3 to their gainful employment -being men's situation the total opposite- before the bill was put in place, now most of them are able to leave their children or dependent family members in public care centres and keep their full working shift.

These are the type of reforms all countries should aspire to introduce if they honestly want to put an end to gender-based discrimination and to a form of slavery that has been deeply ignored and overlooked. The International Labour Organisation estimates that by 2030, there will be 2,300 million

more people in need of daily care, mainly due to a rise in the elderly population. For the families of these people, two possibilities are at stake if no governmental action is taken: paying for private caregivers or providing the care work themselves. In this context, women risk being the ones losing the most.

In face of these alarming predictions, it is time for institutions to act, and to do it with the urgency that this issue requires. Because women are not to be the slaves of a global economic system that takes care for granted.

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