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Getting Unpaid Care onto Development Agendas

There is a large and robust literature on the quantity and importance of unpaid care work. Members of the IAFFE (International Association for Feminist Economics) have produced a substantial, highly credible body of evidence to the highest of standards. But although the evidence is abundant care continues to be neglected in development policy and programming. This briefing explains why and recommends to policy practitioners and activists who are seeking to get care onto development agendas that they employ three power tools to achieve a strategic succession of small wins with respect to naming, framing, claiming and programming care.

What is unpaid care?

Care refers to meeting the material and/or developmental and emotional needs of one or more other people through a direct relationship. It is the foundation of individual and societal wellbeing. Most care is provided by family members and neighbours and is unpaid. Until challenged by feminists, unpaid care was seen as a 'natural' feminine activity. The feminisation of caring responsibilities and the disproportionate time women as compared with men devote to care contributes to women's subordinate position in economic and political life, perpetuating gender inequality. The low wages associated with the provision of paid care indicate its subordinate gendered occupational status.

Unpaid care is largely invisible in development policy and not taken into account in programme design – for example in education or agricultural extension. When unpaid care does get recognised, it is usually qualified as a 'burden' and its central importance to societal and human wellbeing is over-looked. Thus the policy challenge is to enable people to reduce the drudgery elements (hours spent carrying fuel or queuing for water at a standpipe) while supporting them to look after each other across the generations. In developing countries the drudgery element of paid care is almost entirely within the informal economy in which middle class families hire poor women as servants who are often underpaid and over-worked. A more recent trend is people from poor countries undertaking paid care work in a rich country, leaving a 'care deficit' back home.

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The conundrum of policy advocacy on care

Feminist scholars have studied how much time is spent on care, giving it a notional monetary value to demonstrate its importance to the market economy. In order to be heard, this approach is accepting rather than critiquing the dominant ideology of the market. But despite pioneering scholarship and policy advocacy only a partial change has occurred in how mainstream development policy conceptualises the economy. Meanwhile, however, by making an argument based on the assumption that value is determined by the market are we confirming the worthlessness of any central human activity that takes place outside the market? Marilyn Waring recognised this when she wrote that her policy advocacy needs were at odds with her passionate desire to radically change an exploitative global economic system. Short of a global revolution, how can unpaid care get the recognition it merits while avoiding sustaining the system that by its very nature works to keep care off the agenda?

How power keeps care off the agenda

Policy practitioners must recognise the workings of power in order to find the entry points for change. Power shapes personal and system bias to keep care off the agenda.

Challenging the natural order

When our speech or behaviour challenges the natural order, we are judged as mad, bad – or simply ignored – unless sufficient numbers of people share a common vision of change and mobilise to secure societal acceptance of new norms. Policy advocates' success in making visible and securing acceptance of the urgency in tackling violence against women is a case in point. Care is more challenging to get on the agenda because its recognition as a central policy issue would require a major re-think about how our economy works and what we value.

Personal bias

Power works invisibly on what we choose to learn and act upon. For example, gender advocates challenging the development discourse of the 1970's – that framed men as producers and women as consumers – ignored feminist scholars' work on unpaid care because they wanted to demonstrate the significance of women's productive role, including their own as women professionals pushing against glass ceilings.

Class interests may also influence a reluctance to acknowledge care as a policy issue when middle class development

practitioners in low income countries employ their own domestic labour, particularly if they are on a relatively low NGO salary that makes it difficult to offer their domestic employees a decent wage.

System bias

Should personal positionality not be a challenge, broader system bias may discourage gender advocates from pushing against firmly closed doors. When care's invisibility is challenged the burden of proof is thrown back onto the challenger. System bias is sustained by evidence-based policy's circular logic with an argument that runs if there were sound evidence that is adequately communicated, then decision-makers would of course take note and respond. And thus if they have ignored the evidence the implication is that it is flawed and/or poorly communicated.

Strategic ignorance

The discourse of evidence-based policy-making nullifies the possibility of admitting to strategic ignorance of inconvenient truths. These are truths that would oblige a reassessment of policy priorities and budgets and might even challenge one's understanding of how the world works.

Such 'strategic ignorance' explains why the executive summary of the *World Development Report (2011/2012)* – despite an extensive analysis of unpaid care in the main text – excludes care from its list of major 'sticky issues' for gender equality. If unpaid care were given the recognition it merits, then governments and development agencies would have to revise radically their development priorities and budgets. Thus care becomes invisible. Even development organisations that place gender equality at the heart of their work choose not to make it a priority.

For example, at last year's High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness in Busan, the joint action plan on gender and development stressed that 'support for gender equality and women's empowerment in the economic and productive sectors should be strengthened' but care was absent from the text.

The policy process is political

Policies are instruments of power that classify and organise ideas and social relations to sustain or change the current social order. Policies frame how the world is or should be and as such are subject to resistance and contestation. The policy process is a power struggle. Evidence is not enough. To get care onto the development policy agenda requires working within the institutional rules of the game so as to change these rules, both drawing on existing discourses and creating new ones.

Implications for advocacy and practice

The room for manoeuvre of policy practitioners in development agencies is constrained by power. They cannot aspire to more than small wins. Nevertheless, although each small win by itself might seem unimportant, a pattern of successes recruits allies and lowers resistance to subsequent proposals. At the same time, because surprise and unintended consequences are frequent outcomes of policy advocacy, uncertainty and chance offer opportunities to be seized for naming, framing, claiming and programming in support of unpaid care.

Tackling power for change

Because power works to sustain the status quo, putting care on the development agenda requires a political response that recognises and addresses personal and system bias. These three power tools can help to stimulate change.

Tackling personal bias through reflexive practice

Development agency policy practitioners committed to social transformation cannot escape the contradiction that we are strategising for change from locations in a global institution – international development – that arguably sustains inequitable power relations more than it succeeds to change them. The dilemma can only be managed through cultivating reflexivity – looking at ourselves in the mirror and responding self-critically to the dilemmas of power and knowledge that shape aid’s messy relations, including an ever-conscious awareness of the workings of power in our relations with others.

Alliance-building for changing system bias

Alliances need to be built, reaching out to those advocating for global economic justice. The global economic crisis has led to alternatives to the current economic model that are increasingly legitimate to discuss. Nevertheless it is difficult for organisations dependent on funding by governments and the general public to be bold about challenging the bounded construction of the economy that makes care an externality. Policy practitioners working in such organisations should therefore link up informally with civil society and academic institutions and encourage them to include the centrality of care in the current debates on the proliferation of diverse economic forms that are possible. Action Aid International’s new seven-year strategy, for example, includes supporting actions to build and advocate for gender-responsive economic alternatives.

Power analysis to identify and exploit opportunities

Development policy and programming processes are often uncontrollable and their results uncertain. Opportunities are manifold. In choosing and constantly reviewing her options, the

policy practitioner will need to analyse the specific context of the institutional rules of the game, discourses and actors involved, explore and develop her networks and undertake a power analysis (see, for example, www.powercube.net) to determine her room for manoeuvre.

Shaping change through a succession of small wins

Using these three tools, the strategy proposed is a succession of small wins in naming, framing, claiming and programming care. These are in no linear sequence and may often work together. Programming, for example, can be designed to enhance claims while framing is often integral to claim-making or programming development.

Naming: Make care visible in policy discussions

Naming makes care visible and thus potentially a policy matter. Naming includes pushing back at the circular logic of evidence-based policy, for example by inviting economists to discuss ‘strategic ignorance’. By asking people why they think care is invisible, they are encouraged to recognise it. A ‘saturation’ strategy plants care in all possibly relevant contexts so that people start thinking it must be the coming issue and will seek to get better informed.

Opportunities can be exploited. For example, uncertainty within the development sector about how to explain and respond to the rising fuel and food costs in poorer countries provided an opportunity to expose how the discourse of ‘resilience’ and ‘coping’ renders invisible the harder work, longer hours, and greater stress involved in caring responsibilities during difficult economic times.

Framing: Promote care as integral to human wellbeing

Words make worlds. How we frame care shapes what is sought in terms of policy actions and programming. The ‘burden of unpaid care’ so common in the international development discourse signifies that all care is bad and should be reduced so as to get carers into the market economy and contributing to growth. Instead, the International Labour Organization’s decent work discourse could frame unpaid care in terms of ‘decent’ and ‘indecent’ (drudgery) care work. An alternative framing is also possible through integrating care into the wellbeing approach, currently taken up by some United Nations agencies and others. This helps us understand care as something to which humans attach value and therefore sentiment, while being alert to not romanticising care.

Claiming: Demand government action

Claiming is about demanding action to be taken. Policy practitioners can look for opportunities to form alliances with

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civil society groups to reinforce claim-making. Governments that have ratified United Nations human rights conventions can be encouraged to respond to claims to receive adequate care and claims not to be exploited when providing it. Rights relating specifically to care include the right to social security at different stages of the life cycle when individuals may be particularly vulnerable: children, the elderly, the disabled and the chronically sick. Other human rights, such as those to food, housing, and education are also relevant. A framework by Balakrishnan and others for auditing governments' economic policy in relation to human rights claims includes policies relating to care could be promoted by policy practitioners.

Programming: Support more equitable distribution of care responsibilities

By only funding programmes in support of women as entrepreneurs, development agencies sustain the existing social order that exploits unpaid care. Yet, as Diane Elson has shown, there are many opportunities to shape programmes so that care is recognised, that the drudgery is reduced and that the allocation of caring responsibilities is more equitably distributed. Investments in reducing drudgery can be designed and evaluated not solely in

terms of releasing women's time for income earning but more broadly within a wellbeing perspective.

Designing programmes to encourage the re-distribution of caring responsibilities includes supporting men's and women's own efforts to change gender norms that prevent men assuming equal roles in care responsibilities, making it easier for men to become more involved in and respected for sharing the family's caring responsibilities. These objectives should also inform the design of social protection and other public sector interventions, paying attention to ensuring that framing through efficiency arguments - used to raise financing - do not undermine programmes' potential for social transformation. For example, conditional cash transfers to mothers of school-age children in extreme poverty should be implemented to avoid increasing women's work through the lost labour of girls now in school as well as to avoid reinforcing existing gender divisions of labour in which fathers are not involved in child-rearing responsibilities. However, emphasising the redistribution of caring responsibilities within the family should not be used to avoid making the case for fiscal redistribution in support of the right to care and the right not to be exploited when providing care.

Credits

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Further reading

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