Who cares? Addressing the costs of children’s care work and removing the barriers to effective policies to support child carers in the global South

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Austerity has many victims; among them are children who care. There is now growing evidence that economic shocks can act as entry route into child labour, paid and unpaid (Guarcello et al 2008) and that there is a link between unpaid domestic work and domestic violence and associates child care work with lower health outcomes and difficulties in accessing decent work as an adult. The costs of social reproduction (Rai et al, 2013) in relation to child poverty and child rights (Grugel, 2013) overall deserve more attention and, within this, a better understanding of impact of care work on children is crucial.

Child labour in general is highest amongst poorest households (Duryea & Arends-Kuenning 2003; Edmonds 2005). For these groups above all, the privatization of public sector services, rapid changes in labour markets, rising levels of rural-urban and international migration, the expansion of women in work and the rising numbers of old people undoubtedly lead to changes in domestic roles and increase the burden of care that falls to young people. However, the dynamics within households and communities that lead some children to take up unpaid care work are still poorly understood. We do know, however, that adults socialize some children for care work, with girls more likely to become carers (Aldridge and Becker 1993; Cass et al, 2009). The failure to address gender discrimination in the global South also means that girls face a greater burden of unpaid work (Koojimans 2012). This burden of care risks accentuating other barriers to education and other services, thereby heightening gender inequalities and human development losses. The consequences of the gendered dimension of unpaid care work by children, although potentially highly significant, remain under-explored.

Existing studies of child care work in the global South draw from three main approaches:

- Resilience - approaches explores the potential of child carers to construct positive social identities and their social competence through work (Skovdal et al. 2009; Evans 2010). Despite the focus on children’s wellbeing, however, this framework can offer a “convenient escape route” for policy-makers (Rugalema 2007).
Rights based approach - Rooted in the child rights paradigm, suggesting that a recognition of the rights and status of children as carers would enable their interests to be better protected (Robson 2004; Becker 2007). Despite its importance, the rights approach fails to connect children’s care work sufficiently with gender and development and scholarship on unpaid care work and the care economy (Esquivel 2014).

- the Social Reproduction approach locates care giving in the context of reproduction and sustenance of life in a changing global political economy (Robson, 2004). A key feminist concept, social reproduction has nonetheless been applied to children’s unpaid care work only sporadically (see Abebe and Kjørholt, 2009, who document children’s roles, including care, among the Gedeo community in Ethiopia).

A more in-depth understanding of the costs child carers pay, and which children pay them, will enable the design of interventions that will reduce those costs. Care work may bring some benefits to child care workers, for example in feeling valued, emotional closeness or via making an economic and social contribution to the household as resilience approaches suggest; but neither these benefits nor consenting to caring responsibilities, in themselves, offset the costs children pay, including health, educational, skills and social losses that affect both their immediate wellbeing and negatively impact on their future lives (Koojimans 2012).

Rai et al (2013) call these costs ‘depletion’, and describe the strategies to offset them as ‘mitigation’ and ‘replenishment’. The likelihood and scale of depletion child carers experience is affected by their age, gender, scale, nature, context and regularity of care work. It can be analysed qualitatively by comparing the lives of child carers with their peers who do not have care responsibilities, and it can be quantified by measuring the gap between the outflows of their care labour in relation to the inflows of resources they can access - medical care, emotional and social support, education, leisure, income earned and time. Using qualitative and quantitative data can contribute to evaluate the impact of depletion and identify the environment (the extent of social/community services, household structures and the political-economic and cultural contexts) associated with high burdens of care borne by children. This can shed lights on the factors that make harm most likely (for example, the care tasks, number of hours, degree of isolation or exposure to violence etc.), a profile of who cares and the routes children take into care work.

Some of the research questions and gaps that are worth exploring include:

- Who cares? How do the children’s care responsibilities vary with gender, age, household structure and place? How do routes into care differ between and within social and cultural boundaries? Do households, local and national state, health, education and migration systems act as ‘domains of complicity’ in allowing some children carry out care work and if so how do they operate?
• What are the human costs of performing care labour to children? How do children experience depletion through care work? How do they evaluate their own experiences? What might be the gains made by child carers and how can these offset depletion and be more effectively harnessed and recognized?

• How can states and international organizations best address these costs, support child carers effectively and replenish the losses they experience? What are the barriers to successful and effective support for child carers and the introduction of policies that would reduce their burden of care and how can they be removed?
References


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