

"Women's work": Welfare state spending and the gendered and classed dimensions of unpaid care ^[1]

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Excerpted from introduction

Across countries and cultures, unpaid care work is essential to the well-being of individuals and families, as well as to the functioning of national economies. Lawson et al. (2020) estimate that the annual global monetary value associated with unpaid care work by women aged 15 and over is at least \$10.8 trillion. Yet, notwithstanding this immense contribution, as well as a universal need for care at critical junctures during the life course (e.g., childhood, end of life, times of illness), care work remains "the quintessentially female identified activity" (England 2005, 383) and, partially as a consequence, is systematically socially and economically devalued. Across divisions of class, race, citizenship status, and partnership status, women provide the overwhelming majority of unpaid care work, and structural inequalities are woven into the social organization of care at myriad levels (see, for example, Dong and An 2015; Ferrant, Pesando, and Nowacka 2014; Hagqvist 2018).

Unpaid care work, which includes caring for dependent family members and time spent on cooking, cleaning, and other domestic chores, is a key factor explaining gendered disparities in income, occupational prestige, and upward mobility (Esping-Andersen and Schmitt 2020; Folbre 2012). Yet, in addition to highly gendered discrepancies in the provision of unpaid care, caring responsibilities are also highly classed (Gupta et al. 2015; Vagni 2020). This class dimension is typically explained by the fact that (1) higher income households are more likely to outsource this work to paid care providers—who themselves are likely to be low-income women of color, and (2) the gendered division of unpaid care is typically more equal in higher income households (Altintas and Sullivan 2016; Williams 2001). At the same time, welfare state scholars note that ongoing retrenchment of publicly provided benefits and services has led to increasing unpaid care burdens for women, with growing disparities tied to class (Healy 2020; León and Pavolini 2014; Stanfors, Jacobs, and Neilson 2019). Taken together, the literature thus suggests that unpaid care work leads to intersectional disadvantages for women (Pfeffer 2012; Williams 2001).

The present study contributes to the literature on gender, social policy, and unpaid care work using survey data from 29 European countries. We investigate the relationship between gender, class, and social expenditure¹ (both overall spending and spending on family policy) in reducing unpaid care work burdens tied to childcare and housework for respondents living with at least one child under the age of 18 years. In so doing, we address two key gaps in the existing literature. First, our study disaggregates direct and indirect forms of unpaid care work: The former encompasses face-to-face personal interactions with children ("childcare"), whereas the latter comprises auxiliary support for childcare, such as cleaning, cooking, and washing ("housework") (Leopold, Skopek, and Schulz 2018). We unpack the gender and class dynamics at play in these two areas, drawing on research that highlights the potential impact of "intensive mothering" on patterns of care across the income spectrum (England and Srivastava 2013; Schneider and Hastings 2017). Second, unlike the few existing studies analyzing unpaid care work on a cross-national scale (e.g., Altintas and Sullivan 2016; Esping-Andersen and Schmitt 2020; Hook 2010), we explicitly assess the role of the welfare state, investigating how social expenditure and family policy spending are connected to the gendered and classed dimensions of unpaid care.

We conduct our analyses using data from the 2007–2008 and 2016–2017 waves of the European Quality of Life Survey. These data are ideal for our purposes because they offer fine-grained information on the time women and men spend each week on specific facets of unpaid care work, alongside a detailed measure of household income. Ultimately, two key findings emerge. First, by disaggregating different types of unpaid care work and analyzing the effects of gender and income on these tasks, we find that childcare provision is likely more gendered than classed, reflecting trends toward "intensive mothering." In contrast, housework, a form of care work that is more likely to be considered "menial," appears to be shaped by both gender and income—likely because it is more readily outsourced by wealthier individuals to the paid care sector. We find that childcare makes up a proportionately larger component of unpaid care work for wealthier women, suggesting that time spent educating children has become an important means of class reproduction within higher income families; this is not the case for housework, however, where paid services such as dry cleaners, prepared meals, and domestic cleaners are more readily used to reduce unpaid care work burdens by women who can afford them. Second, our investigation demonstrates that whereas overall social expenditure has no clear relationship with hours spent on childcare and housework, family policy expenditure does. Family policy is associated with a smaller gap between the time women and men dedicate to housework (but not childcare) regardless of income

level, although the size of this effect is larger at the lower end of the income spectrum. Together, these results have significant implications for inequality tied to unpaid care work within societies. Our findings reinforce the importance of robust social spending on family policies to address women's "double burden" (at home and in paid work) through targeted spending on programs such as child allowances and credits, childcare support, and single-parent payments.

Region: Europe ^[3]

Tags: gender ^[4]

care work ^[5]

government funding ^[6]

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[1] <https://childcarecanada.org/documents/research-policy-practice/22/01/%E2%80%9Cwomen%E2%80%99s-work%E2%80%9D-welfare-state-spending-and-gendered-and> [2] <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/08912432211038695> [3] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/region/europe> [4] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/gender> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/taxonomy/term/9065> [6] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/government-funding>