



## The Caring Citizen

Why learning to care should be compulsory for all, according to *Sandrine Berges*

Care work, though deemed necessary by all, is both gendered and under-valued—and because it is under-valued, it is also under-compensated. This means that the vast majority of care work is performed by women, and it is either performed for free, by women looking after relatives at home, or for very little compensation. This form of gender injustice has been tied to women not being regarded as full citizens and, in particular, their relative absence from political life. In my [paper](#), I build on a suggestion made by [Ingrid Robeyns](#) that the way to resolve this injustice is to treat care work, including housework, as we would military service. In other words, there should be a universal duty to perform household work and childcare, and it should be instantiated via a compulsory care programme for all citizens.

‘Care’ is often taken to mean face-to-face interaction, helping those who cannot see to their own needs, for example, young children, the sick, the disabled, and the elderly infirm. Housework or food preparation, on this definition, is not really care work; it is work that enables care, but needn’t be directed at a particular individual, and isn’t always tied to others’ needs specifically. For instance, a man cooking a fancy meal for his wife’s birthday is not care work in the same sense as feeding an elderly person who cannot hold her own spoon. Making sure the family home is spotless may be a matter of pride and comfort, but again is not care work in this sense. This stands in contrast to keeping the house dust-free for the sake of a family member’s allergies.

If care is understood as a face-to-face experience and seeing to the needs of those who are not capable of looking after themselves, then what is not included is the general upkeep necessary for running a family home—cleaning, laundry, cooking, shopping, paying bills, and so on—jobs that women generally end up doing whether they work outside the home or not, and which are neither valued nor fairly distributed. I believe that because a strong case can be made for describing these activities as care work, in the sense that they help meet the needs of those who cannot meet their own, we should abandon the claim that work is only care work when it is face-to-face.

The case for this is perhaps more striking when we look at the work of stay-at-home parents who care for infants and keep the house clean at the same time. Although there are parents who choose to stay home with a baby and employ the services of a professional cleaner, the boundaries between the two sorts of work will necessarily be blurred. Who will be in charge of sterilizing the bottles, or of making sure the baby's clothes are washed in special soap, or preparing fruit and vegetable purees to freeze for when the baby moves on to solids? It's not unlikely that the parent will regard these tasks as part of their caring duties, rather than those of the cleaner. They do not involve face-to-face interaction, but they are clearly central to the baby's well-being and are tasks that a caring parent will want to ensure are done properly (as opposed, perhaps, to making sure the windows are well cleaned or the sheets neatly folded). But the blurring of the boundaries does not stop here. Parents will probably also care that their children are brought up in a hygienic environment, where they will be less likely to pick up germs. Again, this is even more likely to be so if the children suffer from allergies. Parents will care that their children are fed a healthy and varied diet, that their meals are served at regular times, and if possible in a social environment (for example, at the dinner table rather than in front of the TV) so that the children can learn how to socialize with one another. Some of this work can, of course, be outsourced and, if it is, then it may be more properly termed 'service'; but it is unclear that when it is performed by a parent, then it is not simply part of caring.

In Robeyn's model, every citizen gets to take part, for an extended but temporary period of time in their early adulthood, in what is currently considered alternative service—that is, working with infants, the elderly, the disabled, or the sick. This is not unlike a system of compulsory military service, but in this case a compulsory care service that includes housework and childcare. This proposal, however, is open to the objection commonly made against other forms of compulsory conscription, namely, that forcing people to join the army for a year or two after they finish school or university is unacceptably coercive, and represents a very large commitment from young people at a time when they are just taking their first steps into independent adult life.

One way of dealing with this problem is to suggest that instead of conscripting school leavers into care service, the service could be built into schooling and spread throughout adult life. This could take the form of care modules, summer placements, or both. Indeed, in several countries, home economics is part of the curriculum and high-school children are taught how to plan cheap and healthy meals, how to care for infants, and so on. Adult citizens could choose to spread their care duties over several years, either by doing care work on a weekly basis, or spending a month each year working for a caring organization. This would both normalize care duties and make it less of an imposition on young citizens. But this would also necessitate certain reforms in the labour market. Employers would need to make space for workers to fit in their care duties in whichever way they saw fit—early finishes, days off, an extra month off in the summer, and so on.

The regulation of employment conditions would thus be an important part of the proposed reform. The building of care duty into the terms of employment would enable the development of caring as a norm. Each employee—male or female—will have care duties of some sort at most points in their career, whether it is performing their citizen duties, doing their share of the housework, bringing up children, or looking after special needs children, the sick, or elderly relatives. If everyone is expected to care, employers must revise certain habits too, such as compulsory late finishes, or early starts, as well as revising certain gendered expectations of what a dedicated worker behaves like.

One immediate benefit of such a scheme is that more carers would be available to help parents and those looking after the long-term ill. If a citizen chooses to work one day a month over a period of ten years as a relief carer for disabled children, for instance, they might become paired off with a family who desperately needs someone they can trust and rely on to be around for a significant period of time. A more general benefit is this: Teaching everybody to do care work will eventually destroy the myth that only women can do the washing up properly, change nappies, or get up in the night to calm a baby. Instead, it will be viewed as work that requires training, and therefore work that calls for compensation as well as recognition—both necessary steps towards greater gender equality.

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