

Beyond Labour Rights

THE ETHICS OF CARE AND WOMEN'S WORK IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY

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Abstract

The protection of workers worldwide is most often sought through reference to the International Labour Organization's 'core' labour standards. These rights are, in themselves, of great importance; that said, however, the blanket approach with respect to workers that results from the over-reliance on rights is gender-blind, and incapable of integrating the crucial normative dynamics of relational power, collective responsibility and mutual dependence into its analysis. By contrast, a normative framework based on a feminist political ethic of care allows for a clear picture of the actual, situated, interdependent lives of all people, and is particularly useful in highlighting existing gender imbalances with respect to responsibilities for care work. Globally, women bear by far the greatest responsibility for care work, and that burden has been multiplied exponentially under conditions of globalization. This article will argue that only a care-centred perspective can provide the necessary moral orientation and policy framework through which to begin to solve these problems of gender (as well as race and class) inequality related to both wage labour and paid and unpaid care work, as well as problems relating to the under-provision of care on a global scale.

Keywords

care, ethics, feminism, gender, globalization, households, international relations, labour, responsibility, rights

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I argue that the dominant, rights-based approach to questions of justice with respect to workers in the global economy is inadequate, especially, but not only, with respect to women workers in developing countries. The

protection of workers worldwide is most often sought through reference to the International Labour Organization's 'core' labour standards, which include a number of individual rights such as freedom of association, the right to collective bargaining and the elimination of discrimination at work, as well as the abolition of child labour. As I will discuss below, these rights are, in themselves, of great importance; that said, however, the blanket approach with respect to workers that results from the over-reliance on rights as a moral and legal framework is highly problematic. A rights-based approach understands both 'work' and 'workers' according to narrow, pre-fixed definitions which are gender-blind, and which disregard the nature and context of the work that is being done. Moreover, the dominant conception of rights relies on a liberal-individualist moral ontology, and is thus incapable of integrating the crucial normative dynamics of relational power, collective responsibility and mutual dependence into its analysis. By contrast, a normative framework which understands not only workers but all people as 'working and caring citizens' is 'better attuned to the needs of women and indeed all persons living in networks of care and responsibility' than is achieved when we start from the position of equal rights holders (Sevenhuijsen 2000: 29). While this 'work-care' perspective allows for a clear picture of the actual, situated, interdependent lives of all people, and is therefore better placed to address their real needs, it is particularly useful in highlighting existing gender imbalances with respect to the giving and receiving of care.

By 'care' I mean paid and unpaid work involving the nurturance of necessarily dependent others – children, the sick and the elderly – as well as non-relational social reproductive work that is 'necessary to ensure the daily maintenance and ongoing reproduction of the labour force' (Schutte 2002: 138). Globally, women bear by far the greatest responsibility for care work, and that burden has been multiplied exponentially under conditions of globalization (Prugl 1999; Marchand and Runyan 2000; Beneria 2003; Peterson 2003). These conditions include: neo-liberal macroeconomic policies; the transformation and relocation of global production, and women's changing roles as workers; the migration of (female) careworkers from South to North; an ageing global population; and an increase in the numbers of chronically ill or disabled due to health crises such as HIV/AIDS, environmental disasters and violent conflict. The 'ethics of care' is an approach to morality that begins from an ontology of fully relational subjects existing in complex webs of interdependence with others (Gilligan 1982; Noddings 1984; Tronto 1993; Sevenhuijsen 1998). This article will argue that only a care-centred perspective can provide the necessary moral orientation and policy framework through which to begin to solve these problems of gender (as well as race and class) inequality related to both wage labour – for example, in factories – and paid and unpaid care work, as well as problems relating to the under-provision of care on a global scale.

Certainly, attention to the rights of workers – including civil and political, as well as economic and social rights – is necessary to address the obvious inequities of inequality and injustice that have been the result of the direction

and management of the current trajectory of globalization. Their potential effectiveness regarding problems of gender discrimination and inequality related to work, however, is limited. Indeed, even where the ILO Conventions on labour rights have been formally enshrined in national law, the 'gender gap' remains evident, both in relation to pay and in relation to women's access to higher-skilled jobs within most sectors of global production (Barrientos and Kabeer 2004: 157).

This article is divided into two parts. The first part will explore the issue of labour standards and rights in the context of economic globalization. Special attention will be paid to the needs and challenges faced by women workers in developing countries. This section will include an analysis of the familiar yet important debate over women's paid work – specifically, whether or not women's entry into paid work in the formal economy is liberating for women, or whether it simply multiplies their burden of work and deepens their oppression. This debate will also include the question of whether or not the enforcement of women's 'rights' as workers through international trade agreements actually improves the position of those women.

Part two will contrast the rights-focused approach to achieving justice for workers with a framework based on a feminist political ethic of care. The latter approach eschews the idea that the only reliable way of securing a decent, safe and fulfilling work experience for all persons is through the legalistic and individualistic language of rights. In particular, I will argue that while labour rights are important to both men and women, they will be of little help to women unless they are backed by sound national and global social policy which recognizes the true extent and nature of their 'work' in developing countries. Such policy, I argue, must be supported by a moral and policy orientation of care ethics, which regards work and care as co-existent.

Critics will argue that this is fantasy; in a highly competitive, globalized economy, corporations (and, increasingly, states) are, more than ever, driven only by competitiveness and profit-maximization. Many firms have relocated their production processes in search of tax reductions, subsidies, lower wages for workers and waivers of certain labour and environmental regulations. Why would they – indeed, why should they – 'care' about their workers/citizens, or indeed, facilitate their requirements for the giving and receiving of care? A feminist political ethic of care recognizes that the politicization of care will entail conflicts and struggles over power and, especially resources. This is inevitable, and necessary, if care is to be regarded as fundamentally political and as an 'object and medium of power'. As Sevenhuijsen (2002: 25) points out,

[t]he question of how needs are interpreted and assessed, who takes care of whom and under which conditions, directly concerns the division of resources and the capacity to invoke the care of others in order to lead a satisfying existence. Among caregivers, care-receivers, care-managers and political decision makers, profound conflicting viewpoints often exist regarding the scale and quality of care.

While this care-based approach does not seek to 'roll back' or reverse economic globalization, it does seek to provide a heretofore neglected set of values and moral discourse around which to mobilize and focus transformative projects. The task, then, is to encourage a widespread recognition of the integral role of caring work in the daily lives of people, especially women, and to consider this equally with productive labour in seeking to eradicate poverty and improve quality of life. On a more general level, moreover, the goal is to make care a 'continuous topic of public deliberation' so that it may be possible to 'formulate well-reflected values that can guide political judgment on this subject' (Sevenhuijsen 2002: 25).

This research is driven by the noted failure to translate feminist critiques of globalization and global political economy into actual policy proposals that could transform the position of women (Pearson 2004: 604). Recent research has indicated that where women have been incorporated into globalization's increasing export-manufacturing sector, there has been a continuing erosion of their potential and existing social entitlements (Razavi *et al.* 2004). Failure to address this can be explained in part by the frameworks used by states and the institutions of global governance in the measurement of development and the formulation of macroeconomic policy. In particular, the continued division between the 'economic' and the 'social' introduces what Elson and Cagatay (2000: 1355) have called a 'male breadwinner bias'; this is the bias that constructs ownership of rights to make claims on the state for social benefits around the norm of a male, full-time, life-long participant in the market-based labour force. This bias ignores the reliance of these men on the unpaid or informal caretaking work of women, and has resulted in the exclusion of many women from benefits. Clearly, policy change is necessary to correct these biases which are marginalizing and exploiting women; that said, policy change can only occur when states and international institutions enlarge their definition of 'work', and recognize the indivisibility of care and paid labour.

GLOBALIZATION, WOMEN'S WORK AND LABOUR RIGHTS

In this section, I will explore the changes to the nature of work, especially in the developing world, that have occurred as a result of the globalization of the economy. In particular, I will look at the impact of these changes on women, focusing specifically on three sets of issues: first, the increased entry of women into paid employment in developing countries brought about by the globalization of production, and the debate surrounding the effect of this on women's 'freedom' and gender equality; second, the strategies of women for survival and household management in developing countries facing economic crisis; and third, the poor working conditions for women in the South and the implications of labour standards and workers' rights for these women.

The purpose of exploring these issues is to expose the diverse and multifaceted nature of women's roles in the global economy, and the impossibility of

making sense of their 'economic' roles as distinct from their social and familial roles within their households and communities. Furthermore, it will help to demonstrate the similarly complex nature of women's oppression within the global economy. While poor working conditions and low wages are certainly a source of injustice that must be addressed, these problems cannot be understood in a vacuum. Seeing women as simply 'workers', de-contextualizes them not only from their gender, but from the 'particularities of gender inequalities and injustices and the ways in which race, class, ethnicity and so on intersect, shape and sustain relations of power' (Koggel 2003: 176). Rather, women and indeed all persons are better conceptualized as 'working and caring citizens', whose 'work' is multifaceted and constantly transforming, and is intimately bound up with social norms and practices, power relations and the always-fluctuating but ever-present need to give and receive care. In making these arguments I will seek to demonstrate why a narrow focus on labour standards and workers' rights cannot adequately address women's oppression in the global political economy.

Globalization and Women's Paid Employment

In his 1999 book, *Development as Freedom*, Amartya Sen argues that if women's freedom to work outside the home is increased, there will be a corresponding increase in their freedom in other areas of social and political life, including home life and personal relations, education and care of and control of their bodies in terms of health and reproduction. Sen (1999: 192) relies on empirical data which show that 'working outside the home and earning an independent income tend to have a clear impact on enhancing the social standing of a woman in the household and the society'. This argument is part of a larger strategy for promoting women's agency; he contrasts his own agency-centred approach with a welfarist strategy; the former is akin to his view of freedom. With adequate social opportunities, Sen (1999: 11) argues, individuals can effectively shape their own destiny and help each other.

Even without the presence of supporting empirical data, this argument carries much intuitive appeal. Moving out of the private realm – traditionally occupied by, and associated with women – into the public sphere of paid employment, should contribute to the erosion of traditional gender dichotomies regarding men's and women's roles. However, many feminists are insisting that the changes associated with increased numbers of women in the workplace must be understood against the historical background of established gender inequalities. As Gillian Youngs (2000: 46) has pointed out, women are often entering the market place to meet demands for cheap, docile labour and to fill semi-skilled and low-level tasks in production processes and the expanding service sectors. Thus, rather than increasing their status, 'an increasing number of women across the world are adding

wage-earning to domestic and family functions and suffering from their socially unequal status in both public and private arenas'. Our ability to analyse this, moreover, is obscured by what Youngs calls the 'patriarchal prism', which sharply delineates the public and private spheres, and which elevates the former over the latter as 'determinant of international reality'.

The statistics which are utilized to describe the power and division of wealth across the world economy reflect ... narrowly defined interpretations of production and consumption at state and market levels. ... [This] works to obscure various aspects of social reproduction in the private realm, that is in the home and the family.

(Youngs 2000: 45–6)

Clearly, any evaluation of the effect on women of increasing entry into the paid workforce must consider this work in relation to a number of other factors, including the physical location and conditions of the work, the responsibilities for household labour in addition to paid work, whether the work is in the formal or informal sectors, the level of control over income and the level of pay (Koggel 2003: 167). Moreover, these factors must be related to the embeddedness of women's work in localized social practices and political institutions (Koggel 2003: 169).

This is not to say, however, that Sen's thesis is always or completely wrong. Despite what are often very poor working conditions, women's paid work can provide important opportunities and gains. Indeed, Naila Kabeer's research, conducted in Bangladesh, demonstrates that women garment workers value their 'proper' jobs, which give them a sense of self-reliance. In accordance with Sen's argument, Kabeer (2004: 18) notes the women's 'greater voice in household decision-making' and 'greater personal freedom and autonomy'. These women also stressed how much they value their access to new social networks on the factory floor, which replaced their previous isolation within the home. That said, many aspects of their working conditions clearly violate the workers' own sense of justice (Kabeer 2004: 22). Interestingly, however, many of the main grievances relate not to wages, but to other factors that can only be understood from a gender perspective. These include sexual harassment, lack of respect from supervisors, difficulty arranging childcare (especially in cases of mandatory overtime) and health concerns such as restrictions on the number of toilet breaks allowed during the working day (Kabeer 2004: 16–17).

All of this would suggest that, while increasing the opportunities for women in developing countries to engage in paid labour is certainly important for their overall quality of life, the actual nature and effects of this work cannot be analysed or assessed in a gender vacuum. In particular, their lives as workers cannot be separated from their lives as carers, mothers and household managers, or from gender relations, social and cultural norms or national and global economic conditions. Both traditional economics and traditional

rights-based moral and legal frameworks have been premised on just such separations, and thus have not accurately characterized most women's real lives, and have done little to address their needs. In the sections that follow, I will go on first to explore the often overlooked yet increasingly prevalent phenomenon of women engaging in 'informal', 'survival' and 'livelihood' strategies. From there I will critique the use of rights-based strategies as a means of highlighting the oppression, and responding to the real needs of women workers.

Women's Survival and Household Management Strategies

As well as examining the implications of women's increased entry in the paid workforce in developing countries, it is important to explore a surprising counter-trend. Especially in countries that have had to undertake austerity measures, often imposed by the IMF as a response to financial crises, the poor – including many women – have turned to means outside of paid labour in order to earn a living. Dickinson and Schaeffer (2001: 161) refer to this as the 'deproletarianization' of women.

Suriname is one such country that has been hit hard by economic crisis, and then by the resulting IMF conditions and austerity measures. In her study of women in Suriname, Mayke Kromhout (2000: 149) argues that many women have turned to a variety of sources of alternative income due to the great difficulties they experience in holding on to their jobs in the formal sector. These difficulties stem partly from their often disadvantaged position in the labour market – related to education and marital status of the women themselves, as well as the nature of the family, and the structure of the household, in which they live. As a result, they have relied increasingly on sources of income outside of formal paid labour. In particular, women have turned to the informal sector, as well as to other resources that stem from their social networks, both internal (the household) and external (friends and acquaintances, family members outside the home and a non-resident partner) (Kromhout 2000: 147).

The specific survival strategies used by these women demonstrate the importance of caring work in their day-to-day lives, and the ways in which household composition is changing to facilitate social reproductive tasks. Many Javanese women in Suriname who are entering the labour market use their extra earnings to provide housing for relatives in return for the sharing of domestic tasks such as childcare and food preparation. This strategy of 'house-sharing' is a way of coping with the obvious difficulties that women experience in combining work for production with the management of their households (Kromhout 2000: 147). These findings defy traditional arguments in the literature, which indicates that 'rational' human beings prefer wage labour because of the resulting income stability. While this may be true for idealized agents – lone male breadwinners – it does not hold for women

who must face a triple burden: first, their ongoing responsibilities for social reproductive/caring work; second, their reduced earning opportunities in the productive sector vis-à-vis men; and third, the country's deep economic crisis, where women, along with the elderly, constitute a most 'vulnerable group' in terms of their ability to meet their basic needs.

Here we see two apparently contradictory trends – the increase of women in wage work, in developing countries and worldwide, and the increasing reliance, especially in the developing world, on non-wage work for survival. But these trends are related. The growing dependence on women's global wage work in manufacturing, agricultural and sex-trade and tourist enclaves is related to the decline in some jobs that once were largely given to men (Dickinson and Schaeffer 2001: 167). And although some women are turning to non-wage work means of earning a living, many continue to hold jobs that pay wages. Dickinson and Schaeffer (2001: 167) make the point clearly:

Laboring women's work burden has increased throughout the world. It has increased because gender relations have been disrupted by recent changes in factory work, environmental degradation, war, and the implementation of austerity measures. It has increased because households need income from informal work and other household survival strategies: trading, vending, microproducing, and migrating to cities and across national borders.

Clearly, an examination of the actual nature of women's work – especially in developing countries – disrupts and destabilizes conventional dichotomies, including public/private, workplace/household and work/care.

Labour Standards and Workers' Rights for Women

As the earlier sections demonstrate, women are severely disadvantaged in the contemporary global political economy. Women in developing countries have been greatly affected by globalization – especially in the areas of production and trade. These changes have been quite significant; the volume of world trade has doubled since 1970, and much of this has been in manufacturing. In developing countries, growth has been most rapid in labour-intensive manufacturing: international wage differentials encouraged the relocation of labour-intensive production to the South, where there exists a low-paid, largely un-organized and female labour force, often working under highly exploitative conditions (Kabeer 2004: 5).

The two previous sections explored two contrasting trends with respect to female labour: first, the increasing entry of women in developing countries into paid labour; and second, the concurrent retreat of women from paid labour into the informal sector, and to household-based 'survival strategies' in the face of economic crisis. While the latter trend remains relatively

unknown and unexplored, the former development has generated substantial attention on a global scale. This section will explore the global movement for the protection of workers' rights as it relates to women in developing economies.

Naila Kabeer (2004: 6) has argued that the transformations of production and labour resulting from globalization have led to a new discourse of 'ethics' in international trade. This largely northern discourse articulates the view that certain minimum labour standards should be observed in the production of goods and services imported to northern countries; this minimum is usually equated with the ILO's 'core' standards of rights – the right to freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining, the elimination of forced or compulsory labour, the abolition of child labour and the elimination of discrimination at work.¹

Certainly, this approach may be critiqued from a number of different perspectives. Developing countries are deeply mistrustful of both the motives and effects of enforcing these rights; they have argued that the international trading system is already tilted in favour of rich countries. Attempts to link labour standards to trade agreements, then, are simply a new form of conditionality that will further entrench the interests of the North. The use of the language of workers' rights is seen as a strategy to disguise the protectionist tendencies of the world's wealthier countries (Kabeer 2004: 8). Certainly, many of those people involved in the movements to enforce labour standards – consumer groups, northern trade unions and so on – are motivated by a deep concern for the exploitative conditions under which many of the world's poorest people work. That said, the explicit linking of labour standards to trade sanctions has generated much criticism, based on the argument that such policies will likely cause economic harm to most export-developing countries, while doing little or nothing actually to improve their labour standards (Kabeer 2004: 9).

My critique, however, is focused on the gender-blindness of these standards, and on the consistent and exclusive use of rights language and a rights-based ethical framework. Issues relating to basic human needs and social justice cannot be conceptualized adequately or effectively by relying solely on the human rights discourse (Baier 1995; Robinson 1995, 2003a, 2003b). Although legal and institutional recognition of economic and social rights – including workers' rights – now widely exists, these rights are often still understood within a liberal framework. One of the problems with this framework is that it is essentially apolitical – rights seek to define the procedures that must be followed for (any and all) individuals to pursue their own ends in life. What is missing in this model of both political or economic rights is some understanding of what is required to secure the political, economic and social conditions which make the exercise of rights possible. Free speech and adequate nourishment do not just materialize out of thin air; they are realized as a result of debate and dialogue about individual and social responsibilities in the contexts of families, communities, states and, now, at the level of global

governance. As Hilary Charlesworth (1994: 61) has argued, rights discourse overly simplifies complex power relations; where structural inequalities of power exist, the 'promise' of rights may be thwarted. This idea is echoed by Christine Chinkin (1995: 120):

[I]n human rights discourse, rights are normally [presented in terms of equality. ... The formal bestowal of rights facilitates the illusion of equality without requiring any further consideration of the complexities of structural and economic power imbalance that inhibit its accomplishment.

In the specific case of national and international standards for workers' rights, these rights are still modelled on a picture of a worker as a fully employed primary breadwinner in formal employment. While this breadwinner may be seen as the head of a household (and thus gendered male), no account is taken of inevitable networks of relationships and responsibilities that exist within and outside the home, and the power struggles inherent in those relationships. Contesting the inequalities of globalization demands that we pay attention to the needs and concerns of those who are most threatened by the structures and processes of the contemporary global political economy – especially the women and children of the South. This means relying not only on human rights – a moral and political concept deeply immersed in historical and contemporary ideas and ideologies concerning freedom and equality – but augmenting or reconceptualizing the rights discourse with considerations of relationships, responsibility and care. Indeed, this example highlights another set of limitations – especially from the perspective of women – of liberal rights discourse: its reliance on a notion of equality and 'sameness' and on a picture of rights-holders as fully autonomous, rational subjects (Bunch 1990; Charlesworth 1994; Romany 1994; Peterson and Parisi 1995).

In response to all of these critiques, important steps have been taken by feminists seeking to rethink and reframe rights. Jennifer Nedelsky (1993: 13) has argued that a 'full, relational self' must be the subject of rights – rather than the abstract, 'stripped-down' rational self of liberal theory. The social aspects of human beings – the networks of relationships in which they are embedded – has been neglected by liberal moral and political theory. This, she argues, is one of the key reasons why women have always fitted so poorly into the framework of liberal theory. If we regard the self as relational, and seek to understand the existence of rights from within the context of social relations, we are more likely to end up with a rights system that can best protect women's – and all persons' – real interests and needs. Seen in this way, the gulf between 'rights' and 'care' is no longer so wide. Rights may be reconceptualized to take account of gender difference and relationality. Moreover, while the distinctiveness of the two ethics may be acknowledged, one may be seen as a fundamental basis for the existence of the other. Indeed, as Joy Kroeger-Mappes (1994: 113) has

argued, the ethic of care and the ethic of rights must be seen as parts of a single system of morality, with the former the necessary base of the latter. Rather than allowing care to remain an 'often unrecognized presupposition', it is imperative to recognize that women's moral labour is essential to the operation of the system as a whole.

Bearing this in mind, it should be noted that some recognition of workers' legal rights remains important – indeed, the rights of workers to organize, and to collective bargaining, are absolutely crucial to the establishment of fair and just employment practices and social justice for both men and women worldwide. Moreover, certain rights – such as the elimination of discrimination, and rights to equal pay for work of equal value – have also been immensely significant for women's struggle for equality within the workplace, and the public sphere more generally. But the limitations of rights may ultimately be more harmful unless we conceptualize rights within the context of necessary and ongoing human relations of care; in particular, the over reliance on women's 'moral labour' and caring work which is required to sustain the liberal rights system must be acknowledged if any kind of transformation of women's lives is to be achieved.

In addition to having working lives that are complex, constantly changing and highly differentiated, however, women are also the lowest-paid, most insecure and poorly organized workers. Even where there are benefits to paid work, there are many injustices in conditions, hours and pay. Women also remain the poorest of the poor in developing countries, and bear the greatest burden in terms of household work and familial and community care. As a result, they are hit the hardest by macroeconomic restructuring and austerity programmes, which involve cutbacks to social services on which they rely. This increased burden puts pressure on the health of poor women and children, as well as on the education of daughters who may have to drop out of school to substitute for their mothers. Added to this is little or no reliable health care, limited reproductive rights for women and, 'given the scarcity of resources for poor families, the vulnerability that being born female brings any girl' (Schutte 2002: 151). This tendency to treat the domestic sector – comprised largely of women – as a 'bottomless well' able to provide the care needed regardless of the resources it gets from other sectors, is resulting in a 'depletion of human capabilities' (UNIFEM 2000: 28).

Clearly, these injustices must be addressed; this can only be done successfully, however, through a theoretical and policy framework which can make sense of the nature of women's roles, their expectations and needs, and the way that often unequal relations of power assign and distribute responsibilities for work and care within the household and the community. A rights-based framework cannot adequately address the needs of women as 'workers'; rather, a moral and policy orientation based on the ethics of care, which regards women as 'working and caring' citizens, can help to create a clearer moral and conceptual framework, and a better starting point from which to formulate progressive global social policy.

The Ethics of Care

The feminist ethics of care was first articulated in the field of moral psychology as an alternative to traditional, Kantian justice ethics. In 1982, Carol Gilligan, influenced by the work of Nancy Chodorow, wrote her now famous book, *In a Different Voice*, which contrasted the modes of moral reasoning of women and girls with those of men and boys. What her empirical research uncovered is that women's morality, by and large, demonstrated a greater attention to the context in which moral situations occurred, and the web of relationships in which moral agents were immersed. While the ethics of care is still prevalent in feminist work in philosophy, it has now found a wider audience in the fields of political theory and, most recently social policy.²

The ethics of care is characterized by a relational ontology; it assumes that all persons exist in networks of relationships, and are fundamentally interdependent. It uses this as a starting point for thinking about both moral responses and responsibilities, as well as about the formulation of social policy. As a moral orientation, it eschews universalist, principle-driven ethics in favour of a contextualized understanding of morality which arises out of relationships with particular others. Rather than focusing on individual rights, reciprocal obligations or universal justice, it emphasizes responsiveness, responsibility, attentiveness, competence and trust as moral values (Fisher and Tronto 1991). Finally, an ethics of care starts from the premise that, at different times, everyone is both a giver and a receiver of care. Thus, it is not an ethics only for women, or for women and their children. On the contrary, as contemporary care theorists seek to emphasize, a *political* theory of care is about emphasizing care as a public value which is crucial for healthy and prosperous societies. As Mona Harrington has argued in the context of US society, assuring good care to all members of society should be regarded as a primary principle of common life, along with the assurance of liberty, equality and justice. She continues,

We need to elevate care to this level of importance for the basic reason that it is essential to human health and balanced development. It is also crucial to developing human moral potential, to instilling and reinforcing in an individual a sense of positive connection to others. And it is this sense of connection that makes possible the whole range of mutual responsibilities that allow the people of a society to respect and work toward common goals.

(1999: 48–9)

Achieving this requires continued and sustained scrutiny and critique of the way in which the public–private dichotomy is played out in a variety of social settings.

It is this conviction of the importance of care in public life that has motivated the emerging research in care and social policy. In particular, this work has focused on ways in which paid labour and care can be combined in societies in order to ensure better and more readily available care for all citizens without placing undue burdens on the carers, especially women. Not surprisingly, however, most of this research relates specifically to developed, northern welfare states.³ I am arguing here, however, that a political ethic of care has a place in the development of social policy in the South, as well as in global social policy; in particular, a political ethic of care can provide a better framework from which to begin thinking about and acting to create better lives for working and caring women in developing countries.

Work and Care in the Global Economy

A feminist political ethics of care eschews the dominant idea of rights as the key moral concept for achieving social justice, and focuses instead on responsibility. But responsibility is not regarded as some kind of moral imperative that can be morally or legally enforced; rather, it is understood as an always, already existing part of the daily lives of all people. It recognizes that we all have developed relationships that are 'thick with commitment or expectation'. Indeed, an ethics of responsibility aims to 'accommodate the richness and diversity of what people have reasons to care about and take responsibility for' (Walker 1998: 105–6). Translating this moral orientation into a public value and a policy standpoint means recognizing all people as existing within such networks of relationship and responsibility. Work, then, is not regarded as immune from these networks, but immersed within them. Indeed, research on work in the USA has shown that the difficulties employers have in trying to reduce the 'work–family' squeeze lie in deeply rooted assumptions about the nature of work and the workplace; in particular, the idea that the business world is a separate place with separate concerns from the private domestic domain, and has no responsibility for it (Harrington 1999: 52–3).

These assumptions are widespread; indeed, they permeate both theory and activism related to globalization and workers in the South. The 'anti-sweatshop' movement, as well as other movements to enforce labour standards and workers' rights, use the ILO's core standards as a basis for their activist goals. As noted earlier, these standards focus on rights and freedoms associated with labour organization – including freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining – as well as minimum standards with respect to wages and working conditions, and bans on child and forced labour (DeWinter 2003: 142). As I argued earlier, however, these rights are limited, since they retain a narrow focus on work as paid labour, decontextualized from the household, and from the local and global relations of care in which people's daily lives are immersed.

Perhaps the first step towards creating global social policy that can improve the lives of women, and indeed all people of the South, is a shift in focus away from rights towards basic needs (Streeten 1981; Moser 1991). Indeed, as Naila Kabeer (2004: 27) argues, we must move away from the narrow preoccupation with labour standards in the globally traded sector to a consideration of working conditions in the wider economy. She argues for greater global redistribution that guarantees access to the basic means of survival; this, in turn, could enable them to engage as citizens in wider struggles for social justice in their society (Kabeer 2004: 28). A care ethics framework reminds us that caring activities and moral orientations are crucial for the provision of basic needs (Sevenhuijsen 2000: 14). A care perspective compels us to recognize the interrelatedness of care and work in the daily lives of many people, including and especially 'working' women in the South. Many of these women engage in a variety of kinds of work: paid wage labour in manufacturing; paid and unpaid 'care' work in the home or other social institutions, or often in others' homes; informal sector activities inside and outside of the home; subsistence agriculture and other survival strategies which often fall outside of conventional categories of work. For these women, care and work are not separate; care, while often motivated by love and personal responsibility, is work, and work, traditionally understood, must continually be balanced with responsibilities of care.

While enlarging conceptualizations of 'work' and recognizing the importance of work and care in the lives of all people is a necessary first step towards transformation, the possibility of actually implementing such change in practice seems remote. Unlike a rights framework, which is universally recognized and implemented through existing legal instruments and institutions, the meaning, implications and channels of implementation of a 'care' framework are largely unknown.

Moreover, any such transformation in discourse and policy is likely to be met with resistance. This will come from states, employers and even male employees and members of households who feel threatened by the potential material and personal losses that might ensue from the recognition of unequal burdens of care work, as well as from attempts to address this through policy reform. There may also be tensions among women as 'first world feminists' attempt to rethink definitions of work and the place of care for women of the global South, without adequate understanding of local cultural and religious norms or gender relations.

However, if the goal of feminist international political economy is to inform policy change which can improve the daily lives of working and caring women (and, ultimately, men), then we have no choice but to confront the 'false analytical divide between production and reproduction' (Pearson 2004: 618). Ruth Pearson (2004: 617) suggests that demands for policy change should explicitly link women's work in export production to the provision of publicly supported reproductive services. She suggests a 'Maria Tax', which would require national governments to levy a tax on exporters

reflecting the proportion of women in the workforce utilized to produce the commodity or service being sold to the global market. The revenue would then be reinvested to support women generally within the economy, in terms of childcare facilities, reproductive and occupational health facilities and education programmes. Not only would this contribute to women's welfare directly, but it would also offer 'mobilizing and advocacy' possibilities by emphasizing how the sexual division of labour still gives women overwhelming responsibility for reproductive tasks (Pearson 2004: 618).

Suggestions such as this address transformation at the level of global economic governance. Again, while it may seem unlikely that organizations such as the EU, the WTO and the IMF would stray from their current policies, Stephanie Barrientos and Naila Kabeer (2004: 166) argue that they may indeed be forced to recognize the links between trade reform, poverty and gender. Indeed, the Millennium Development Goals are partly responsible for prompting multilateral economic organizations and international financial institutions to focus on employment as an important mediating linkage between trade and poverty; this, inevitably, will lead to a focus on gender, since they are both a significant proportion of the poor, and the employees in many global production sectors.

Small steps are already being taken at the local level to recognize the importance of caring work for well-being, and to assist in the balancing of caring work and productive labour. Kabeer points to the work being done by various nongovernmental organizations to respond to the needs of women workers in Bangladesh. These include Nari Uddug Kendra, which provides safe low-cost residential facilities for working women; and Uthsao and Phulki, which seek to promote childcare facilities for women both within the community as well as located within factories (Kabeer 2004: 23). The childcare centres set up by Phulki, for example are located within a number of export garment factories, and are financed by contributions from employers, employees and an initial subsidy from a donor agency (Barrientos and Kabeer 2004: 155). In India, SEWA, the Self-Employed Women's Association, is one of the few trade unions in India for workers in the informal economy. It has almost a quarter of a million women members, and it focuses on eradicating poverty through a number of different commitments: women's collective strength and bargaining power; access to savings, credit and insurance, capacity building through education and social security based on women's roles as workers, mothers and caregivers (Barrientos and Kabeer 2004: 161). An organization such as SEWA understands the needs of women workers better than many traditional trade unions, which tend to reproduce the norms and behaviour that treat women as a subordinate category and marginalize their needs and priorities as women (Kabeer 2004: 22–3).

Finally, rather than encouraging global corporations to adopt a set of decontextualized and gender-blind 'workers' rights', pressure should be put on these corporations to recognize the importance of care in the lives of its workers. This means working with other actors, including NGOs, to develop

better policies and facilities for childcare, maternity, parental and care leave and health care. Abolishing mandatory overtime, and increasing flexibility with respect to hours worked would also assist women with the balancing of their work and caring responsibilities. Indeed, as Barrientos and Kabeer argue (2004: 163–6), what is required is a collaborative approach, whereby different stakeholders work together to initiate change – including regulations, action and accountability initiatives. These stakeholders would include governments, private-sector corporations, trade unions and NGOs. In addition, multilateral organizations and initiatives, such as the UN Global Compact, which involves the ILO as well as companies and civil society organizations, may be instrumental in changing both attitudes and policies regarding caring work.

CONCLUSION

In this article I have argued that the true nature of women's work in the global economy cannot be understood using a 'lone male breadwinner' model and that, hence, policies emphasizing only labour rights will be of limited value in improving their quality of life. Instead, I have advocated a moral and policy orientation based on a feminist ethic of care, which recognizes the integral role of care and caring work in the lives of all people. This orientation does, however, focus on women, based on the fact that women still bear the greatest responsibility for caring work/reproductive labour around the world today.

I have argued that adopting this framework is of great urgency in the poverty-ridden countries of the South, where women are among the poorest of the poor. In many of these countries, women have been increasingly entering the paid labour force, due to the reorganization and relocation of production brought about by globalization. This participation, however, does not necessarily lead to greater emancipation, since cultural norms and practices, levels of education and gender relations contribute to reduced employment opportunities for women in terms of wages, benefits, types of employment available and job stability. As a result, an apparently contradictory trend is evident: while women are entering the paid labour force in greater numbers, they are also exiting the formal economy in favour of income-generating activities outside of the home. This 'deproletarianization' of women is due partly to the instability and insufficiency of income generated by paid employment, but also partly due to the constraints faced by women in seeking to handle their responsibilities for caring work within the household.

Groups seeking to achieve social justice for workers in developing countries have sought the acceptance and implementation of ILO labour standards, including freedom of association and the right to collective bargaining. It is believed that guaranteeing these basic rights to workers in developing

countries will go some way towards mitigating the poor conditions and low wages suffered by workers in the South as a result of trade liberalization and the globalization of production. While these basic rights are certainly important, I have argued that they do not reflect the reality of the situation faced by women, and indeed the households to which they belong, in many countries.

An approach based on a feminist political ethic of care, by contrast, recognizes the importance of care as both a moral orientation and a set of practices that affect the daily lives of most people. In particular, however, a care perspective forces us to accept that daily caring work is unevenly divided between men and women, and that the recognition of care as a 'valuable social activity in its own right' is a necessary first step in improving the position of women in most societies (Sevenhuijsen 2000: 30).

If the aim is to achieve social justice for 'workers' in the South under conditions of economic globalization, we must eschew the preoccupation with workers' rights in favour of an integrated approach that considers the role of both productive and reproductive work. Unlike a rights perspective which regards workers as individualized agents, a care perspective sees people as existing, at a fundamental level, in relation with others; thus, it recognizes the importance of *households*, which may include extended family members, and where wealth is distributed for particular needs and persons according to particular patterns. Related to this, a care-based approach accepts the importance of care and caring work in the meeting of basic needs within households, and is committed to an understanding of the strategies, including income generation, used by many women to meet their responsibilities of care. Understanding the true nature of women's working lives, especially in countries facing economic crisis as a result of globalization – is the first step towards the creation of national and global social policy which can help to facilitate both the productive and reproductive labour of women *and* men, and thus to provide the members of households – including children and the elderly – with better life chances in an often hostile neo-liberal global economy.

Finally, it is worth considering that the ethics of care might legitimately be regarded as incompatible with the values of contemporary global capitalism. The ethics of care is an approach to morality that is built around those moral relations that concentrate on meeting the needs of necessarily dependent others, rather than on notions of fairness and reciprocity in relations among 'equals'. It demands attentiveness to details, responsiveness to particular others, and responsibility over the long term. Even its moral discourse – care, needs, dependency – is antithetical to the neo-liberal discourse of global capitalism, which emphasizes individual rights, autonomy, objectivity, reciprocity and profits. If it is so difficult to achieve even basic labour rights for workers, especially in the global South, how can we expect that global capital will see fit to enlarge their definition of work, and make the necessary changes to ensure the ability of all persons to give and receive adequate care?

Put plainly, is an ethic of care fundamentally incompatible with the contemporary organization of production and, more generally, capitalist market relations?

I would argue that the relationship between 'care' and capitalism should be approached with caution, but not with despair. Certainly, the values of the market are, in many ways, antithetical to those of care. Indeed, much has been written about the dangers of 'marketizing' care work, including the erosion of the quantity and quality of care (Folbre and Nelson 2000; Held 2002; Sevenhuijsen 2003: 183). While this increasing trend towards 'marketizing' care is much analysed, rather less has been written about the converse issue – injecting 'care' into the market. Clearly, both the problem – of increased care work burdens for women and decreasing provision for care – and the potential for solutions to this problem, are exacerbated in an economy characterized by transborder production. I would argue that rather than seeking to reverse trends towards what Jan Aart Scholte (2005: 606) calls globally co-ordinated, transborder and supraterritorial production, efforts should be concentrated on seeking an alternative discursive, moral and policy framework which can moderate the scope and intensity of market values.

Moreover, as Nancy Folbre and Julie Nelson (2000: 138) remind us, there is a difference between the 'idealized, hypothetical market of impersonal exchange and real markets with their dimensions of provisioning, relationships and incomplete commodification'. It is certainly true that at the height of the 'Washington Consensus', it appeared that nothing could dilute the neo-liberal principles that reigned over the global economic system. More recently, however, some chinks in the armour have been detected. Indeed, I have argued elsewhere (Robinson 2006) that the ideas and practices behind corporate social responsibility are partly driven by the dissatisfaction of large sections of civil society around the world, and the resulting calls for a greater 'governance' dimension to the workings of the global political economy. If sufficient attention and activism can be mobilized around women's role in global production, and the link between this and the care of children, the sick and the elderly, it is not beyond the realm of possibility that corporations, and the institutions of global economic governance, could include provision for and of care in their policies. As Virginia Held (2002: 32) has argued:

We should not preclude the possibility that economies and corporations themselves could be guided much more than at present by the concerns of care. Economies could produce what people really need in ways that contribute to human flourishing. But long before an economy itself is influenced by the values of caring, persons for whom care is a central value can and should affect the reach of the market.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, what the quotation by Held reminds us is that, ultimately, feminist social and policy transformation is dependent upon power.

Recognizing the ubiquity of unequal power relations must, ironically, be the first step in the long process of integrating into global social policy.

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Notes

- 1 See International Labour Organization, 'Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work'. Geneva: International Labour Organization, June, 1998. <http://www.ilo.org/dyn/declaris/DECLARATIONWEB.INDEXPAGE>
- 2 See especially Held (1993); Tronto (1993); Sevenhuijsen (1998); Hutchings (2000); Hankivsky (2004).
- 3 On Britain and the Netherlands, see Sevenhuijsen (1998); on Canada, see Hankivsky (2004); on the USA, see Harrington (1999).

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