

Chiara Saraceno

# Beyond Care. The Persistent Invisibility of Unpaid Family Work

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# Beyond Care

## The Persistent Invisibility of Unpaid Family Work

by Chiara Saraceno

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### Introduction

The stalled, or unfinished, gender revolution literature [Esping Andersen 2009; Gerson 2010] suggests that decreases in gender specialization in paid work, following the increased women's labor market participation, have not caused substantial decreases in specialization in unpaid family work, which in turn leads to a lower investment by women in paid work.

In both the policy literature, including that from a feminist perspective, and in policy making, this issue has been addressed mainly with regard to the issue of care, generally further limited to caring for a pre-school child. After having been thematized as a special dimension of unpaid family work, not to be simply conflated with housework,<sup>1</sup> in policy discourses and analyses, (child) care now seems to have absorbed, or rather hidden, all other unpaid family work. This focus is too restricted, however, for several reasons. First, it implicitly denies that caring demands may concern also different life phases. School age children also need care and supervision, although less time intensely than younger children. School schedules, however, are rarely included in family policy analyses and in work-family reconciliation debates and research.<sup>2</sup> A care focus restricted on pre-school children also overlooks both

<sup>1</sup> For an overview of this development see Leira and Saraceno 2002.

<sup>2</sup> For a rare exception see Gornick, Meyers, and Ross 1997.

the caring demand of not self sufficient individuals and the fact that these demands are mainly addressed, within households and families, by women [Pfau Effinger and Geissler 2005]. Second, unpaid family work does not include only care. It covers a range of different activities, from routine household chores, to cooking, shopping, dealing with various bureaucracies up to caring, within which Waerness [1984] further distinguished between servicing, when caring for an able bodied adult, and caring proper, when dealing with a young child or a not fully self sufficient person. Furthermore, even when a young child is present, care does not make up for all, or even most, family work, and it might even intensify some of the non caring activities within it, such as cleaning the floors, doing the laundry, cooking,<sup>3</sup> going to medical visits, and so forth. Childcare services, while substituting for part of the caring time/work, substitute much less, if at all, for the other kind of work linked to having a child. In addition, as pointed out several years ago by an Italian sociologist [Bianchi 1981], childcare and other services themselves, in order to be “properly used,” require a careful work of interfacing, at the relational and organizational level. In other words, services – be they kindergardens, schools, home care services for the frail old – do not only substitute for unpaid work. They also require unpaid work/time to be used.

Thus, on the one hand, in most gender policy discourse and analyses, caring obligations and work are restricted to a very narrow phase of life and in reference to a subgroup of women and men, that is, to parents of very young children. On the other hand, only very recently the great bulk of unpaid family work has started to be included in the analyses of the gender unbalances which “stall” the gender revolution not only with regard to women’s labor market participation and work career, but more generally with regard to social and political participation<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the focus on child care frames the issue of the gender division of labor mainly as an issue which concerns almost only (young) mothers and fathers, i.e. (young) couples. But data on time use show that gender differences in unpaid family work concern women and men in all ages and family conditions, although to varying degrees across household statuses and countries. Gender differences exist also among childless, partnered or un-partnered, men and women, starting at a very young age – well before having own family responsibilities.<sup>5</sup> Thus, if it is true that the greatest difference in men/women labor market participation (i.e. paid work) today concerns mothers [Van der

<sup>3</sup> For i.e. when the child starts eating something different from milk.

<sup>4</sup> For an analysis of unpaid family work with regard to social and political participation see Hook 2006; Hook 2010; Crompton and Lyonette 2007; Stier and Lewin-Epstein 2007; Knudsen and Wærness 2008; Van der Lippe *et al.* 2010.

<sup>5</sup> See for i.e. Eurostat 2010.

Lippe *et al.* 2010], this may be a consequence not only of the gender division in child-caring. Or rather, the gender division of child care may build on, and strengthen, an already existing gender division of labor in unpaid family work.

Of course, differently from care, it is politically as well as practically difficult to conceptualize housework as a target for policy making and for public responsibility. Yet, as I will argue in discussing the existent literature, the apparently circular link between women's labor market participation, conciliating policies and men's participation to unpaid family work needs to be unpacked, and issues of gender equity should be addressed together with those concerning overall demands on time on the one hand, well being on the other hand.

### **Identifying and Unpacking Unpaid Family Work**

For a long time, what is now grouped under the label “unpaid family work” was simply called housework. Starting in the seventies, however, feminist analyses pointed out that, first, not all work performed for one's own family was performed within the home (i.e. shopping, paying bills), second, unpaid work performed for one's own family (as well for oneself), did not include only the production, transformation and maintenance of goods, but also that of human beings. Furthermore, analyses pointed out that, particularly in the so called developed service societies, there was a specific area of necessary work – dealing with bureaucracies, with providers of different kinds of services and so forth – which might be identifiable neither with traditional family work nor with care [Balbo 1978]. A further distinction concerns that between routine, rigid, tasks (such as preparing meals, cleaning), and tasks which are occasional, or occur at longer intervals (i.e. cleaning the car, shopping for the child's clothes, doing house repairs). Research has shown that this distinction greatly overlaps with that between more feminine and more masculine typed kinds of tasks [Twiggs, McQuillan, and Ferree 1999; Coltrane 2000; Crompton and Lyonette 2007; Hook 2010]. These studies also suggest that the degree of gender segregation within unpaid family work is strictly linked to the degree of gender unbalance in time spent on it.

This complexity indicates that unpaid family work is not identified by a specific content, rather by the conditions under which it is performed. Any item of this work, in fact, in principle may be done – and actually often is done – by some non family member or service, for pay, but also for free. Volunteers shop or clean house for frail older people; cleaning services do the laundry for a fee; restaurants, cafeterias catering services offer different kinds of meals; agencies or individuals may clean and do the household repairs for a fee; financial services monitor savings and investments; and,

of course, public or private care services may take care of small children or of other dependent family members. Actually, cross country and cross class differences to a large deal depend on the degree to which some of the tasks involved in unpaid family work are outsourced and under what conditions and relationships (i.e. to public services or to the market). Unpaid family work, therefore, concerns work performed, within or outside the household, for the family or individual members within it, by another family member. Its content and intensity are determined at the interaction between needs (i.e. household size, presence of family members within or outside the household needing help), family members with whom it can be shared, quality of the housing infrastructure and technology, housekeeping and caring cultures, availability and cost of market services, availability and cost of public, mainly care, services.

Somewhat paradoxically, notwithstanding the awareness of the content and relational complexity of unpaid family work, and the increasing availability of time use data across many countries, comparative research, also for methodological reasons [Hook 2006, 2010], offers only simplified versions of time spent in the various activities involved in this work. Two main approaches may be identified. One approach considers only so called “core housework”: cooking, doing the laundry (including ironing) and cleaning the house [Crompton and Lyonette 2007; Van der Lippe *et al.* 2010; Hook 2010]. These activities may be considered separately, or together, or some particular sub-item may be missing. But what is important is that these studies ignore both all the activities in the caring category, and all the activities which occur outside the household, such as shopping, taking children to school or to other places, taking things to the cleaner and so forth, as well all the administrative activities, such as paying the bills, dealing with services and so forth. Another approach [Hook 2006] encompasses a greater number of activities, including those connected to care, but lumps them together, without allowing to see who does what when. Studies that combine both an encompassing and a disaggregate view of activities are found only at the national level.

A further distinction in approach depends on the source used. At the comparative level, the main sources are two: the 2002 Family module of the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), which asked who “usually” carries out a range of household tasks, and the Multinational Time Use Study (MTUS – or HETUS when it includes only European countries), which includes surveys conducted, in some country, since 1965, and measures time use in 40 standardized categories [Gauthier, Gershuny and Fisher 2002, 2003]. Of course, the latter source is much more adequate than the former [Hook 2006], since it is based on a time diary, offering a time measure in minutes, not, as in ISSP, subjective assessments of own and other people’s engagement on a five points scale.

## Evidence and Explanations of Persistent Gender Divisions of Unpaid Work

Based on the, empirically unfounded, idea that gender ideologies and expectations matter only for partnered men and women, not for singles [De Ruijter, Treas, and Cohen 2005; Van der Lippe *et al.* 2001], both empirical research and explanations for the persistent gender asymmetry in unpaid family work focus exclusively on men and women living in couple households.

The study by Hook [2006] and Van der Lippe *et al.* [2010] on a large number of countries are an exception to the exclusive focus on couples. In particular, Hook monitors trends in time use in twenty countries over a twenty years time span among all – partnered and un-partnered – men, to assess variation due to marriage and the presence of children. But it does not include women. Considering overall unpaid work, without distinguishing within it, Hook finds a clear trend of increasing unpaid work time<sup>6</sup> among married, employed fathers. There is, however, a large cross country variation both in intensity of unpaid work and in pace of change. Hook also finds that both unmarried and married men do more unpaid work in countries with a higher women's labor force participation. For each percentage increase in national levels of married women's employment, men's unpaid work time increases by 0.5 minutes. Thus, the behavior of men appears to be influenced not only by what their partners do with regard to paid work, but by the general context of their society's gender relations as expressed by women's employment rate. This is a quite important reversal of what found in mid-Twentieth century, when data suggested that, by marrying, men saved unpaid working time, shifting on their partners the little they did as singles [Michel 1978]. Although, on average, women who are partnered and with children still do most of unpaid family work and spend overall more, paid and unpaid, time working, men no longer free themselves from unpaid work when they live with a spouse or partner. This is certainly due to the increase in dual worker couples, but most likely also to an overall change in expectations in gender relations, due to a more general change in cultural climate and particularly to increased women's education. The latter, in fact, has reduced the share of partnerships/marriages which are asymmetrical in the partners' education level, with women usually having a lower one. Hook finds, however, that in no country men do more than 37 percent of all family work within their households. Furthermore, on the basis of her analysis, she concludes that no further increase of this share may be expected.

Van der Lippe *et al.* [2010], also based on time use data, consider all men and women of working age with regard to their participation to paid and unpaid

<sup>6</sup> About six hours per week on average, between 1965 and 2003.

work, the latter restricted only to housework, to the exclusion of care. Since they are interested in the impact of marriage and having children on the gender division of paid and unpaid labor in different institutional contexts, the authors do not deal, however, with gender differences among the un-partnered and childless (which they actually assume as non existing and without any cross country difference, contrary to what happens to participation in paid work, without offering any evidence for it). They find that the division of housework between partnered men and women is more unequal in former communist and southern European regimes than in the liberal, conservative, and social democratic regimes. The first two groups of countries, however, are somewhat at the opposite with regard to women's employment, thus indirectly confirming that women's employment is not a linear and automatic cause for greater gender equality in unpaid work.

Explanations of the unequal division of unpaid family work in couples range from the micro-level to the institutional ones.<sup>7</sup> At the individual and household level, the relative resources, gender ideology, "doing gender," and time constraints perspectives have all received partial support, but tend to explain only a small portion of variance in men's unpaid work time (Bianchi, Milkie, and Sayer 2000). As Coltrane [2000] concluded his decade review, researchers are just beginning to understand why men do so little and the pace of their change is much slower than that concerning women's participation to paid work. Analyses from an institutional perspective have also found only contradictory support to the hypothesis that the most egalitarian divisions of household labor is found in the more gender egalitarian and generous Scandinavian welfare states and the least egalitarian divisions in the conservative-corporatist countries of Western and Southern Europe [Kalleberg and Rosenfeld 1990; Bryson, Bittman, and Donath 1994; Pacholok and Gauthier 2004]. In particular, research has found little variation between the Scandinavian and the English speaking liberal countries [Baxter 1997; Gershuny and Sullivan 2003; Hook 2006]. While, on the basis of this finding, Gershuny and Sullivan argue that the national context matters little, if at all, for the gender division of unpaid labor, other authors rather argue that the concept of national context should be unpacked in its various dimensions/components: labor market characteristics [Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010], working time regimes [Rubery, Smith, and Fagan 1998; Mutari and Figart 2001], specific welfare state arrangements, gender norms and gender arrangements.

Hook [2010], for instance, finds that even controlling for individual working time, long average work weeks for men are associated with more specialization in domestic work. Women spend more time cooking and more time on housework in

<sup>7</sup> For an overview, see Coltrane 2000; Saraceno 2007; Lachanche-Grzela and Bouchard 2010.

contexts in which long work weeks are the norm for men. At the same time, men spend less time on housework in countries where employed mothers are more likely to work part-time. In other words, national working time regimes affect individual behavior and the gender division of unpaid family work irrespective of the specific couple's paid work arrangements. Based on the analysis of how men and women partnered and with children divide core household tasks, Hook adds another dimension of context which is relevant to explain men's behavior to that evidenced in her 2006 study on men only. Men's (and women's) behavior is influenced not only by the overall women's employment rate in their country, but also by the country specific working time regime and the ideal of the (male) worker it supports. She concludes that national context has a twofold effect – one on individuals' pragmatic decision making and the other on the gender normative arrangements in which the decision making is located.

Cross country and intra-country variations in the degree of this gender division, however, do not simply overlap with variations in women's employment rates and working time regimes. Also social policies matter. For instance, in the same study, Hook [2010]<sup>8</sup> finds that countries where there are long – a year or over – parental leaves (which are usually taken by women), women cook more and do more and men do less housework, once again suggesting a twofold – pragmatic and normative – effect of the institutional context. She also finds that both the availability of public child care and men's entitlement to parental leave reduce women's cooking time (i.e., cooking related to having children), while affecting neither men's cooking nor housework time. Again, this effect occurs independently from the individual men having taken advantage of the leave. The interplay between policies and the division of unpaid work is not linear, however. Comparing France and the UK, Windebank [2001] finds that, despite a similar incidence of dual-earner household and French women's longer history of extensive labor force participation, British dual-earner households are slightly more egalitarian in the division of household labor than the French ones. She suggests that the more generous provision of public child care services in France reduces the amount of unpaid work expected from women with children in this country, thus also the impact of their being employed on men's participation to unpaid work. She concludes that it is not ideology, but a lack of alternatives that forces British men into unpaid family work, although they on average work for pay longer hours than most Western European men. Hook [2006] also found that Norwegian fathers do a similar amount of unpaid work, or less, as fathers in the United States because, although women's labor force participation rates are similar in both coun-

<sup>8</sup> But also Van der Lippe *et al.* 2010 based on the same data.



tries, employed women in the United States work longer hours, while having less access to public services. In this perspective, one might argue that men step in when the state does not, or vice versa.

Crompton and Lyonette [2007] argue that material conditions (working hours, service coverage), women's employment rates and even the actual experience of being employed/having an employed spouse, are not enough to explain cross-country differences in the gender division of unpaid work. Based on ISSP data, thus on estimates of who does more often what, they rather argue for the importance of cultural attitudes. According to these authors, French/British differences in the gender division of unpaid labor within dual worker couples are better explained by the more traditional attitudes towards gender roles in France, than by the higher level of child-care coverage in this country. The even more traditional attitudes in Portugal also explain the strongly asymmetrical gender division of unpaid labor in this country, notwithstanding the comparatively high women's labor force participation. Also Van der Lippe *et al.* [2010] find that the gender division of housework is most egalitarian in liberal, not in social democratic countries. But they conclude that the interdependence between policies and gender arrangements is clearer in the case of paid than of domestic work (excluding care). They suggest, therefore, that national- and class-specific "housekeeping cultures" may differ across countries and be more resilient in some countries than in others, as well as in different social groups, somewhat independently from women's employment participation. The Eastern European countries, from this perspective, are an interesting example, in so far, notwithstanding the high women's labor force participation and the long working hours not only for men, but also for women [Saraceno 2005], the gender division of unpaid labor has remained fairly traditional. Van der Lippe *et al.* also find that in masculine cultures, according to Hofstede's typology [Hofstede 2001], married women do more housework, and highly educated and married women do less paid work, than their counterparts in feminine (i.e., more gender equal) ones. Crompton and Lyonette [2007], however, found that, when they are employed, highly educated women in more traditional gender cultures outsource more often domestic work to paid persons than in more gender, but also social class equal, countries, thus further "liberating" their male partners from participating in unpaid family work.

### **Re-Orienting the Focus?**

Hook [2006] concludes her analysis of trends in men's participation to unpaid work arguing that no further increase is to be expected as a direct consequence of a

changing attitude among men. Further increases are likely to occur only if women's labor force involvement continues to increase,<sup>9</sup> especially if it is coupled with policies that are supportive of men's family work, i.e. direct entitlement of fathers to parental leave, with a reserved father's quota. There is, in fact, empirical evidence that women's, and particularly mothers' employment has a positive effect on men's (not only fathers') participation to unpaid work. There is also some evidence, again at micro and macro-micro level, that when there is a reserved quota for fathers, and it is well paid, not only fathers are more likely to take it, thus partly re-defining the caring division of labor, but women do less housework even if men do not do more of it. According both to Hook [2006; Hook 2010] and Van der Lippe *et al.* [2010] long parental leaves on the contrary, possibly because they are taken only by mothers, strengthen overall the gender division of labor not only in care, but also in housework. Childcare services, instead, slightly reduce the amount of housework performed by mothers, thus indirectly contributing to reduce the gender gap. In this case, however, more than a change in the gender division of labor, policies produce a change in the division of labor between women as mothers and the state, with non family, mostly female, paid workers performing part of the work.

At first view, a clear policy indication emerges from these findings, from the point of view of changing the gender division of unpaid family work. Namely, all policies aimed at increasing women's labor market participation are automatically policies which favor the rebalancing of the gender division of unpaid family work: because they reduce de facto, but also in the cultural expectations, women's availability for unpaid family work.

Other data, however, cast some doubt on the straightforwardness, and even desirability, of such a conclusion. In the first place, high rates of women's employment are not always associated with a higher degree of gender equality in general, and particularly in unpaid work. The cases of Portugal and, even more, of the Eastern European countries are the counter evidence for such an expectation. An increase in women's employment does not grant automatically an increase in gender equality in attitudes and behavior, particularly with regard to unpaid work. It may on the contrary increase the – paid and unpaid – work burden of women, particularly of mothers, and possibly worsen the quality of life for all. Policies concerning child care may partly compensate this, but only limited to the care and domestic work connected to the presence of children and for a short, if crucial, period of life. In this perspective, also the interpretation of the negative impact of long leaves on the gender division of unpaid work should be revised. Long leaves with no specific en-

<sup>9</sup> See also Iversen and Rosenbluth 2010.

titlement/reserved quota for fathers exist mainly in countries, such as the Eastern European ones, where childcare coverage is comparatively low, particularly for the under three [Saraceno and Keck 2010]. The other countries which have similarly long leaves are the Scandinavian, where however, with the exception of Denmark, there is a specific father's quota and where childcare coverage is among the highest in Europe. These are also the countries where, on average, the gender division of unpaid work is less unbalanced. The real exception is the UK, with its short leaves, no specific father's quota and reduced childcare coverage, where, however, men do as much, if not more, unpaid work as in the Scandinavian countries.<sup>10</sup> The simple explanation that they cannot avoid it precisely because of the difficulties working women experience in juggling paid and unpaid work is, however, very weak, again in the light of the situation in the Eastern European countries (where, after all, leaves do not last forever and women work longer hours even than British men). The impact of prevalent gender models, at the micro, but also societal, level needs to be further explored, and so does the important Hook's insight that the national context has a two-pronged effect, on the practical and cultural conditions within which individuals decide how to behave with regard to the division of unpaid work.

But there is another caveat in thinking that increasing women's employment rates is the main road to increase gender equity in the division of unpaid family work. Recent research on work-family conflict, in fact, casts some doubt on the linearity of the link between increasing women's labor force participation and men's increasing participation in unpaid family work, particularly among the social groups – the better educated and high skilled men – who traditionally have been on the forefront of the gender equality trend. Increasing pressures from the labor market and the work place since the early 1990s, in fact, impinge particularly on these workers, slowing down any further improvements on the home front [Crompton and Lyonette 2007; Gallie and Russel 2009; McGinnity and Calvert 2009; Cha 2010]. Moen [2003] and Gerson [2010], looking at the United States, have also pointed out that paid work risks colonizing all available time.

This trend opens issues which go beyond the gender division of unpaid work, or better, clarify the societal issues which are at stake and which the gender division of labor has for a long time contributed to “solve.” The tension between working and family time and demands is not new, in fact. It rather became explicit in industrialized societies, which have, so to say, “invented” the gender division of paid and unpaid work to address it [Crouch 1999]. While this solution is increasingly less tenable and accepted, particularly with regard to paid work, a society where all adults are

<sup>10</sup> Anyway, according to a study by Sullivan *et al.* [2009], they do less child care.

in (possibly full time) paid work and this work is both unsecure and demanding is also untenable. Furthermore, it is likely to produce new social inequalities while not eliminating the old: between mothers and non mothers, between parents and non parents, between those who can afford to outsource, and pay, part of the family work and those who cannot.<sup>11</sup> The higher resistances found, in some country, to reduce the gender division of paid and unpaid labor, opting rather for some form of one and a half breadwinner family model, may depend not only on these countries' higher traditionalism with regard to gender roles. It may also partly depend on the perceived costs, in terms of overall quality of life, of a society of full time adult workers, particularly where full time is long and rigid.<sup>12</sup> The financial costs of this solution, of course, are strongly skewed towards women. Furthermore, not in all households there are two adults who can divide paid and unpaid work between themselves, sharing the benefits of both. And not all households can even afford it. What I wish to suggest, is that simply evoking a gender traditionalism, which may be overcome encouraging women to enter paid work, is not only insufficient. It also hides the time crunch under which many households and individuals find themselves. I do not have readymade policy solutions to offer. But, while I find the recent studies on the use of time and on the gender division of paid and unpaid work extremely important and insightful, I find both their explanations, and the policy directions to which they seem to point, still too much driven by concerns with participation to paid work, rather than by a more integrated concern with overall well being.

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<sup>11</sup> For the impact of economic inequalities in the amount of housework performed see Heisig 2011.

<sup>12</sup> See also Lewis 2009.

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## Beyond Care

### The Persistent Invisibility of Unpaid Family Work

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**Abstract:** In both the policy literature, including that from a feminist perspective, and in policy making, the issue of the persistent unbalance in the gender division of unpaid work has been addressed mainly with regard to care, generally further limited to caring for a pre-school child. Yet, unpaid family work includes many more tasks. On the basis of an overview of the most recent studies on the division of unpaid family work, the article discusses the partiality – in empirical and theoretical terms – of existing explanations and of their focus on women's labor force participation as the main road towards a better gender division of unpaid labor.

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*Keywords:* Unpaid family work, gender, policies.

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**Chiara Saraceno**, former professor of sociology of family at the University of Torino, is at present research professor at the Wissenschaftszentrum Berlin für Sozialforschung. Among her books, *Mutamenti della famiglia e politiche sociali in Italia* [il Mulino 2003], *Sociologia della famiglia* [with Manuela Naldini, 2nd edition, il Mulino 2007]. She has edited the volume *Families, ageing and social policy* [Edward Elgar 2008], with A. Leira, *Childhood. Changing contexts* [Emerald/JAI Press 2008] and, with J. Alber and T. Fahey, *Handbook of quality of life in the European Union* [Routledge, 2008].