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Book Review

EJWS

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European Journal of Women's Studies
1–3
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DOI: 10.1177/13505068251331406
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Shirin M. Rai, *Depletion. The Human Costs of Caring.* Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2004. ISBN 978-0-19-777772-5 (pbk) ISBN 753554 (hbk)

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Feminists have long recognised that the uneven distribution of caring and domestic work has a detrimental effect on the well-being of those, predominantly women, who carry it out. It constitutes a time tax and results in their having less access to paid work and money, lowers their lifetime earnings and pensions and leaves them fewer resources with which to withstand adverse circumstances. It can also lower their independence, their voice in household and community decision-making, their presence in positions of power and political and economic policymaking and reflects and reinforces the unequal power relations between women and men. Yet both domestic and care work are vital to 'individual socialisation and the reproduction and maintenance of human capabilities upon which economic life depends' (King Dejardin, 2009: 3). While economists are beginning to take some interest in the economic value and contribution of this work, less attention is given to 'the human costs of caring' – the sub-title of Shirin Rai's book – Depletion.

Depletion occurs 'when the outflow of social reproductive labour exceeds the inflow of resources, tipping those affected over the threshold of sustainability' (Rai, 2024: 4). By social reproduction Shirin Rai is referring to 'the reproduction of life itself' and by linking social reproduction with depletion she considers the extent to which it possible to 'recognise, asses, measure and address' this human and planetary harm (Rai, 2024:3). This challenging agenda is set out in the first chapters which elaborate the concepts of depletion, initially advanced by Diane Elson (1998) and developed further by Shirin Rai and colleagues (2014), and social reproduction, via a discussion of this extensive and long-standing literature.

Shirin Rai argues that this research as well as resistance to the adverse effects of depletion has largely been ignored by policymakers actively and passively resulting in mis or non-recognition of the harm done in terms of the erosion of individual lives and social institutions as well as the unequal ways in which this harm is done to people and the planet across all dimensions of location – especially race, gender, social class, but also historically and geographically. She speculates modestly on whether this book – thinking about social reproduction as depletion – will make any difference and argues that 'scholarly interventions can be an important means of political campaigning to recognise what is being systematically kept out of view' (Rai, 2024:49) and so she proceeds to do so, first by considering how to measure depletion.

To make depletion visible, she argues that it needs to be measured in multiple registers – quantitatively, qualitatively, and by different aspects of social location and at different geographical scales which presents an enormous challenge. But is this challenge feasible?

She begins by reviewing a wide range of quantitative methods including Time Use Surveys (TUS), and Household Satellite Accounts and by critically assessing the quantitative model she developed previously with her colleagues (Rai et al., 2014). However, she encounters the usual dilemma that while 'relevance wants us to be ambitious', that is to include as many dimensions as possible to represent depletion accurately, 'usability urges restraint'(Sen, 1987) that is if the measure is to be used by policymakers, especially at the international level, it must be relatively simple to avoid measurement errors and to ensure that the necessary data are cheaply available for different geographical regions and social groups. In these respects, she argues that these quantitative techniques largely fail.

TUS's, while perhaps the best approximation as they record time spent on 'paid work, household and family care, personal care, voluntary work, social life and leisure activities' at short intervals (15–20 minutes) during the waking day (Rai, 2024: 66), but as Shirin Rai argues they raise ethical issues by placing the burden of data collection on the participants, many of whom are under time pressures already. Such measures are also likely to be biased as not everyone has the ability, time, or inclination to record their time use accurately. In addition, she argues that this method fails to capture the rhythms of everyday life, why time is spent in particular ways, or how participants reflect on their time and whether it results in stress and fatigue (Rai, 2024: 72). Furthermore, she highlights the limitations of qualitative methods because while better able to provide context and understanding, they are highly labour intensive so inevitably have to be carried out on a small scale and thereby raise questions about generalisability (Rai, 2024: 74).

Chapters 3 and 4 present original research relating to the everyday work, life, and commuting patterns of eight women from different social classes in New Delhi. Here, Shirin Rai deploys in a 'prefigurative form' the Feminist Everyday Observation Tool (FEOT), a mixed-method approach she developed with Jacqui True (Rai, 2004: 3; Rai and True, 2020). This method transfers the burden of collecting data from the participant to the researcher who records in detail what the participant is doing at intervals over the waking day and draws on this data to interview the participant in greater depth to find out how they reflect on their use of time. This 'narrative ethnography' (Rai, 2024: 72) is highly labour intensive so limited in scale, but it was inspired by TUS and indeed aims to combine with them to create a more comprehensive picture in any particular location.

Considerable detail is reported from the diaries recorded by the research assistant, Pujya Ghosh. For Deepa – a working-class home maker, for example, the 'relentlessness of social reproduction' becomes very clear and Shirin Rai (2024) argues that 'Depletion can be read off this diary of a day' (90). This and other cases make it very clear how all the women, but especially those from the working class, seem to spend most of the waking day doing either paid work or unpaid domestic work and caring (outflows) leading to stress and tiredness. But is this quite the same as measuring depletion?

She also reports important differences by social class in terms of inflows. The upper-class working and upper-class homemakers, and to a lesser extent, their upper-middle-class equivalents have much more support (largely from paid help – maids, servants and access to cars sometimes with drivers) (inflows) with which to carry out this work compared to the middle and working classes and arguably greater choice in terms of managing their lives. In all cases, while help from family and friends is also mentioned with respect to caring and domestic work, their male partners rarely are. If the upper and upper middle classes are not doing this work, then they remain responsible for organising it and believe themselves to be so.

However, across the social classes some women express pleasure from doing their paid work. Meera, for example, a working class woman, reports that her paid domestic work is 'more palatable' than doing the same work at home and Sabina, despite her tiredness, especially from commuting argues that her work as a journalist broadens her mind and gives her a chance 'to exchange ideas with people' (2024:100). This complexity leads Shirin Rai to comment that sometimes 'It is difficult to say what is an inflow and what is an outflow' (2024:100) thereby making the measurement of depletion rather difficult.

Two further original empirical studies are reported. Chapter 5 highlights the significance and costs associated with children doing social reproductive work in very different contexts and then focuses on her own research of the effects of caring for a parent or sibling on children from 24 households in Coventry, UK. She finds that it is highly complex in some cases leading simultaneously to depletion and empowerment but always requiring more support, in the form of education for the children and better health and social services for the households.

Shirin Rai takes a different turn by addressing planetary harm in Chapter 6. It considers the present and anticipatory impact of titanium mining on the Amadiba people in Xolobeni, South Africa. By drawing on the literature relating to a legal case brought by the people and a series of photographs and postcards she demonstrates the impact of depletion not only on individuals and households but also on their community and environment. She also considers the resistance and potential alternatives to planetary harm and ways of living. In the concluding chapter, Shirin Rai brings the issues together and discusses in more detail ways of mitigating and replenishing depletion.

Overall, this book really is a 'tour de force' as one of the endorsers states; it provides a rich discussion of the social reproduction literature, three detailed case studies in very different contexts demonstrating how depletion harms people and the planet in unequal ways; how it is sometimes mitigated, resisted, and replenished and why depletion should be on the policy agenda. While highlighting the significance of depletion however, the question of measurement remains rather open, making a challenging agenda for others to follow.

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