

# The labour of care: why we need an alternative political economy of social care



*Caring is often taken for granted as an activity. But what happens when a social emotion is monetised? [Insa Koch](#) explains what the consequences are for those dispensing and those in receipt of care at a time of austerity politics, and in a legal system where female carers have never had the same rights and protections as their male counterparts.*

Insa will be speaking at an [LSE public lecture](#) on the topic of this article on 1 May 2018.

Caring for others is a fundamental part of any society: by ensuring that everyone in need of care has access to assistance and support, we guarantee the wellbeing of every person and hence of society as a whole. Indeed, so central is the provision of care to the idea of societal health and progress that it was once considered an integral part of the post-war welfare state.

However, in Britain today, we are moving further and further away from the ideal. Decreasing quality in care for the elderly and disabled, on-going withdrawal of government support for the social care sector, and [extortionate costs for care services](#) are all evidence of a broader process of commodifying care. As the financialisation of everyday life has found its way into the care industry, [caring for others has been turned into a commodity](#) for profit-making that is only answerable to the demands of the market.

How did we end up in this situation? What are the consequences for both those dispensing and those in receipt of care? And how, if at all, can we get out? Some of these questions lie at the heart of Lydia Hayes's book [Stories of Care](#) which takes as its point of departure the current state of the British paid care sector, in particular with respect to homecare provisions. The rising demand for elderly care has prompted the British state to shift financial resources away from institutional care and towards the provision of care in people's own homes. Estimated to employ about one million care workers for the elderly and disabled, the homecare industry is almost entirely run by the labour of working class women who confront increasingly badly paid, precarious, and inhumane work conditions, with only very partial protection by labour law.

## The Labour of Care

Hayes's book traces the transformation of care from what was once a public good, however imperfectly conceived and implemented in practice, to an entrenched crisis of social care in Britain today. At the core of her book is an argument about foregrounding the role of policy and law: we cannot understand the most recent process of commodifying care but as part of a more encompassing and complicated history of how legislators, judges, and policymakers have systematically devalued and discriminated against the work of those employed in the care industry. What is more, they have done so by using labour law as a tool for cementing both classist and gendered forms of control. Whether with respect to questions of equal pay and sex discrimination law, the right to employment protection in the event of unfair dismissal or the national minimum wage scheme, women in general, and working class women in particular, [have never had the same rights and legal protections](#) as their male counterparts.

But if the devaluation of working class women's paid care work runs deep, then privatisation has taken this to a new level. Privatisation has driven the reorganisation of carers' status from public sector employees to agency workers self-employed personal assistants. Culminating in the Care Act 2014, market-driven reforms have refashioned caregiving as a fundamentally economic enterprise which supposedly liberates care recipients by enabling them to engage as economic actors in the market of social care. And while politicians have promoted 'choice' as an improvement on an older paternalistic system of care, this narrative ignores that choice remains a fiction for those with limited means. Self-employed carers today face ever harsher exclusion from the benefits of traditional employment rights, while their clients have to make do with increasingly badly run, patchy, and insufficient services.

## From paid care to informal care

But market-driven reforms have not only deeply impacted upon the labour of care with respect to the paid social care sector. As I show in my research with working class women (*Personalising the State*; forthcoming, OUP), when it comes to informal care, there too neo-liberal reforms have deeply impacted upon the most intimate forms of human care. By informal social care, I refer to the mostly unpaid and invisible labour that working class women – as the main bearers of social reproduction – engage in inside their own homes, with respect to their children, grandchildren, kin and others who they consider part of their households. In these settings, the practical value of social care is inseparable from its moral worth.

Yet, informal care also becomes the terrain for penalization and state control. Means-tested welfare policies that have largely replaced the post-war system of social insurance prioritise ‘single’ claimants over collaborate households. Neo-liberal shifts to ‘law and order’ governance turn working class women into the bearers of collateral consequences of harsh policing, as they find that they can be evicted from their social rented homes for the activities of other household members. And under austerity politics, policies like the [bedroom tax](#) have further reduced women’s autonomy over their own homes by defining what constitutes an adequately-sized home.

The effects of these policies are both classist and gendered: they are classist because they operate in areas of policies that disproportionately target working class citizens – welfare, social housing, and criminal justice. And they are gendered because they act on domains of social reproduction that remain the responsibility of women.

### Where to go from here?

What does the future hold? At a time when the number of people in need of care is growing more than ever, it seems obvious that the case for political reform is pressing. Hayes’s book advances a range of recommendations with respect to the paid care sector that target the reversal of the state’s criminalization of care workers, a fundamental reform of equal pay law, a new suit of legal rights with universal protection, and the establishment of collective bargaining. But a broader lens on care pushes also the need for reform both within and beyond the case of labour law: if the value of care work is to be adequately recognised across the spectrum – both in its paid and in its unpaid, its formal and informal capacities – then the marginalisation of working class forms of care with respect to housing, welfare, and criminal justice policies, ought to be addressed.

More radically, there is a need to rethink the very basis of citizenship relations, and relations between citizens and the state. As the lived experiences and voices of carers shows, caring for others is not something that ought to be subject to the logic of profit making: it is a moral activity, one which is founded on a recognition of shared vulnerability. It is precisely by reconnecting the *moral* value of care with the *political and economic* conditions in which working class women perform their labour that we can begin to formulate an alternative political economy of care: one which pushes against the ever-increasing drive towards profit-making and commodification, which rejects the logic of penalization and state control, and which reinstates care as a fundamental public good.

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### About the Author



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