

CARE IN CONTEXT: TRANSNATIONAL GENDER PERSPECTIVES

Vasu Reddy, Stephan Meyer, Tammy Shefer and Thenjiwe Meyiwa, eds.
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Reviewed by Joyce Mohapi

Department of Social Work
University of South Africa
mohapbj@unisa.ac.za

Care in context is edited by academics, based in South Africa and Switzerland, who have all published extensively in academic journals and books. Their writing covers a range of topics, including women and gender, HIV/AIDS and gender, gender-based violence and educational issues.

The book has a foreword by Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Executive Director for United Nations (UN) Women, who advocates for the equal sharing of care duties by men and women, in order to give girls an opportunity to reach their potential. In the preface, Joan C. Tronto of the University of Minnesota notes that there is an element of justice and human rights to caring, and that it is a holistic matter.

The book covers the subject of care, which is significant globally because of the vast number of people who are employed as care-workers in various fields, including those who care for HIV/AIDS patients and those with other widespread chronic diseases, like tuberculosis and diabetes. Most of these caregivers are female and, in some instances (as in South Africa), their services are voluntary. They often operate under difficult circumstances because of a lack of resources (for example, transport), which makes them vulnerable.

The book follows academic principles in terms of style and methodology. It presents empirical evidence from various studies conducted in South Africa and Switzerland. Data are presented by means of tables, discussions, photographs, as well as narratives from those who participated in the study.

The book is divided into five parts: the introductory chapter, 'Towards a critical theory of care', was written by the editors. This section gives the context of the book



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and presents the conceptual charting of care. The remaining parts deal with the theories, concepts, policy imperatives, practices, models and narratives around care.

Part one, 'Theories and concepts of care', comprises six chapters by different authors and focuses on a UNRISD project undertaken in South Africa and Switzerland. It touches on the burden of women, who take greater responsibility in doing unpaid care work. Other issues raised include matters of care and social justice, government policies on care (focusing on examples from Switzerland), care in South Africa in the context of HIV/AIDS, and the gendering of care work. In part two, 'Policy imperatives and care', the focus is on care and health-related policies in South Africa and Switzerland. Part three, 'Practices and models of care', places the emphasis on the analysis of home-based care services in South Africa, the non-profit sector, gender, the role of the elderly in care in Switzerland, and the challenges of gender-based violence in higher education. Part four encompasses 'Narratives of care'. This section reports on the experiences of young people, men and families who do care work, amongst others for HIV-positive children, as well as the social and institutional support available to young mothers. The book ends with a chapter by the editors, which gives an indication of possible further research.

The book has a clear and explicit focus on care, and specifically how it relates to gender issues. Care in this context is rendered by social workers, nurses, health workers, volunteers in NGOs, parents, and those who care for family members. This is a crucial and complex issue, because without care workers there would be no one to ensure the wellbeing of a wide section of society. *Care in context* stimulates thinking about the inequalities which exist in care work, specifically demonstrating that the greater burden of such work falls on the shoulders of women, thus indicating a female bias. This has serious socio-economic implications, as in some contexts (South Africa, for instance), some care work which is done through non-profit organisations is voluntary and therefore unpaid. This means that women do a lot of important and hard work which is critical for the wellbeing of others. The carers are, however, not benefitting as they do not receive any monetary rewards which could enhance their quality of life. The fact that care work is voluntary in some contexts also means that its status remains low compared to other jobs.

The unequal distribution of the burden of care may also imply such women are less empowered, due to the unequal distribution of power. To balance this perspective, one chapter in the book focuses on men and their roles in care work, and how their involvement affects their masculinity. This is not always given recognition, since they are in the minority.

Care in context also elicits thinking about the nature of care work. As much as care work is vital for human beings to thrive, the way it is being practised (for example, performed locally by volunteers in NGOs and non-profit organisations) raises the question of whether it can be regarded as 'decent work', as defined by the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Volunteer caregivers do not receive a salary or any benefits associated with their work (medical aid, pension scheme, other benefits).

The book offers an analysis of both the South African and Swiss policies, for a comparative view of the African and European contexts of care work.

The research evidence presented in this book makes an excellent contribution to the body of knowledge on this field. It is a crucial resource for the development of policies on care work, nationally, regionally and globally. If policy makers take into consideration the issues raised here, it could have a significant effect on the lives of the many dedicated carers. The editors and authors involved in the writing of the book deserve to be lauded for documenting this evidence in an unambiguous and professional manner.

The book is a valuable resource for policy makers, academics, NGOs, students, international organisations, the private sector and civil society, as it presents evidence of research conducted on care, voluntary work and its female bias. It also raises critical questions which may widen the scope of further research.



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