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WOMEN'S CARE WORK ACTIVITY AS UNPAID AND CONTINUOUS LABOUR

Aktywność opiekuńcza kobiet jako nieodpłatna i nieustająca praca

Abstract: Work, depending on who performs it and in what context, is burdened with various symbolic and social meanings. An interesting example of these dependencies is the issue of women's unpaid caregiving work. It is crucial for the functioning of late capitalist, neoliberal society, yet it remains marginalised in dominant discourses – to the extent that it is not accounted for in GDP calculations in Poland; it is systematically unseen and undervalued by the state. I analyse the issue of such work through my field research, carried out from July 2021 to February 2022, on the eating habits of retired women in Warsaw. I conducted 39 interviews with retirees, during which the topic of food served as a means of understanding the stories of their lives, in which wage labour intertwined with household efforts. The lives of the interviewees were filled with the experience of constant "busyness" – many of them spoke of free time as regained or obtained for the first time in retirement. In the article, I analyse the role of unpaid caregiving work in their lives, what significance it had for them in the past and present, and how it was embedded in the surrounding network of relationships.
Keywords: care work, eating habits, retired women

Streszczenie: Praca, zależnie od tego przez kogo i w jakim kontekście jest wykonywana, obarczana jest różnymi znaczeniami symbolicznymi i społecznymi. Interesującym mnie w tym artykule przykładem tych zależności jest kwestia nieodpłatnej pracy opiekuńczej kobiet. Jest ona kluczowa dla funkcjonowania późnokapitalistycznego, neoliberalnego społeczeństwa, a jednocześnie wciąż ulega marginalizacji w dominujących dyskursach – do tego stopnia, że nie jest ona uwzględniana w wyliczeniach wskaźnika PKB w Polsce; jest systemowo niewidziana i niedoceniana przez państwo. Kwestię pracy analizuję poprzez przeprowadzone przeze mnie badania terenowe, przeprowadzone od lipca 2021 r. do lutego 2022 r. na temat zwyczajów żywieniowych kobiet na emeryturze w Warszawie. Przeprowadziłam 39 wywiadów z emerytkami, w trakcie których temat jedzenia służył mi za środek rozumienia historii ich życia, w którym aktywność zarobkowa przeplatała się z wysiłkiem w domu. Życie rozmówczyń wypełnione było doświadczeniem ciągłego „bycia zajętą" –wiele z nich mówiło o wolnym czasie jako odzyskanym, czy uzyskanym po raz pierwszy, na emeryturze. W artykule analizuję, jaką rolę odgrywała w ich życiu nieodpłatna praca opiekuńcza, jakie miała ona dla nich znaczenie w przeszłości i teraźniejszości, i jak osadzona była w otaczającej je sieci relacji.
Słowa kluczowe: praca opiekuńcza, zwyczaje jedzeniowe, kobiety na emeryturze

Introduction: Women and work

The progressive industrialisation of society in the 19th century translated into a separation of the public and private spheres of life. Work performed at home or in household workshops was replaced by activity in burgeoning factories. This change meant that women – especially those from the city, from the poorest social class – crossed the symbolic boundary of belonging to the home and entered the public sphere of life previously reserved for men (Wójtowicz 2017). Women were able to work in the factories because factory owners needed all the labour they could get. At the same time, labour laws concerning female workers began to provide for a minimum limit on the permissible exploitation of female

workers earlier than that had happened for men due to the social role that patriarchy assigned to them.

The first laws regulating the length and conditions of work applied specifically to women and children (Goworko-Składanek, 2020). This change marked the beginning of the codification of the rights of working people in the new capitalist reality. On the other hand, it may have become a structural limitation to their employability in the cruel labour market of the 19th century. Therefore, it was only the horrors of the two great wars and, at the same time, the need to rebuild Poland after the Second World War that ushered in a realistic change in the situation of women, prompting patriarchal society to allow them to actually work independently (Goworko-Składanek 2020).

The information contained herein is an attempt to summarise the discourse on the history of women's work. Professional work, yet the adjective 'professional' can easily get lost in the tide of legislation, industrialisation, and wars. But when did women start working? I will not attempt to reconstruct the distant past. However, I will state that 19th-century capitalism, which brought about the beginning of the nuclear family, reinforced, if not cemented, the patriarchy of Western European countries on the basis of the socio-cultural gender contract (Szachowicz-Sempruch 2016).

Subsequently, in line with the tenets of the post-war policies of the countries of the global West in the second half of the 20th century, the functioning model of societies was based on family remuneration received by the working male, while economically 'inactive' women took care of the household or acted as supplementary labour (Ghodsee 2020). It meant that women were now fully responsible for care work at home. This assumed obligation remained with them even when the labour market became deregulated in terms of employment norms and a complete change in the gendered structure.

The option of paid work outside of the household, which I have already identified as vital to women's financial independence, also meant that they were compelled to take on more than one full-time job rather than being able to choose them. In the neoliberal, capitalist Poland of today, women's

work is invariably invisible. Parallel to the rampant free-market mechanisms commercialising more and more institutions of the welfare state, it is increasingly becoming the primary mechanism facilitating the stability of society, still equally overlooked by the neoliberal lens of the state (Titkow, Duch-Krzystoszek, Budrowska 2004).

The UN defines work as participation in productive activities for which individuals are remunerated or performed without pay for the benefit of a family business or family. This definition, also recognised by the International Labour Organisation, implies that people whose activities produce products or provide services – whether they are sold or not – should be considered as performing work. Care work, whether performed in households or for payment, occupies a special place in society. Many of the basic activities that make up the daily, unpaid management of a household are not covered by this definition, even though these activities are performed for the benefit of others and consist precisely of the unremarkable work that allows household members to function comfortably. On the other hand, narrowly understood care work, even when paid, is seen as the socially gendered role of women and is therefore devalued and lowly paid (Zatorska-Mazurkiewicz, 2016).

However, it is rarely acknowledged that this work must be paid for. Activity on behalf of others is emotional labour, rooted in the caring and relational role of the stereotypically conceptualised family. At least, this is how the state and the neoliberal discourses operating within it imagine it. As such, it is codified as part of the private sphere of life, the responsibility of households, and is strongly relational – with a value that is, after all, above market value. As a result, this amounts to ascribing the obligation to perform it to women and overlooking the need to assess its value fairly and materially, to remunerate it or to acknowledge it (Zatorska-Mazurkiewicz 2016).

It is a simple fact that providing care in both family and social contexts is part of the fabric of society that is necessary for it to function. It is work. It requires specific competencies, skills, and knowledge, which those performing acquire through expert knowledge or practice and generational transmission. Nevertheless, it is still performed, above all by

women, unseen by the state, both in economic and social terms. What is overlooked is its economic value and importance, as well as the fact that women's entry into and participation in the labour market and other areas of the economy is dependent on the amount of time they spend performing unpaid, necessary household work. This results in the reinforcement of the position of social norms and patterns that systematically create and restrict women's positions in the labour market and reinforce the gender division of responsibilities (Zatorska-Mazurkiewicz 2016).

As it stems from conservative-neoliberal capitalism, the way in which work at home, including care work in the broadest sense, is perceived as a matter of 'choice' for the individual, leads to a cultural idealisation of the everyday yet very labour-intensive and necessary tasks associated with running a household. Justyna Szachowicz-Sempruch speaks of a schizophrenic situation in which the economic value of women's care work clashes with its cultural value. The person taking care of the home, children and loved ones is doomed to be torn between the two. On the one hand, she represents a 'sacred' responsibility for another person. On the other hand, she herself is completely dependent on another individual for financial sustenance. Her economic contribution to the household is neither recognised nor legally valued (Szachowicz-Sempruch 2016).

Feminist economic thought calls for a fundamental change in how we perceive unpaid work. It argues that this work has a fundamental, yet in no way calculable, contribution to the national and global economy. It highlights the detrimental impact of family policies that fail to acknowledge the vast pool of female labour performed within the home by mothers, grandmothers, and informally remunerated third parties (Rogowska 2018). GDP indicators overestimate the real growth of the consumption capacity of capitalist societies in the global north. They fail to take into account the vast amount of unpaid care work that is indispensable to maintaining the imagined prosperity and development within them (Szachowicz-Sempruch 2016). In line with Anna Titkow, I assume that women's unpaid household work is a cultural norm with a deeply internalised universal mode of functioning that includes both men and women (Titkow, Duch-Krzystoszek, Budrowska 2004).

In my article, I relate the experience of providing unpaid care and professional work through the stories of the retired women I met and interviewed as part of my field research. Such theoretical consideration is reflected in the experiences of real women, who are culturally obligated to provide unpaid care on a daily basis. I think that the realities of socialisation into continuous work – in and out of the home – can best be told through ethnographic research focusing on women's life trajectories.

The experience of care work from the biographical perspective of retired women

From 2020 to 2022, I participated in the course *Anthropology of (in) equality: food practices in Warsaw*, supervised by Dr Renata Hryciuk. As part of the project, I embarked on my first field research. The subject I selected for investigation were the eating habits of retired women in three distinct locations within the city. A total of 39 interviews were conducted, incorporating elements of the subjects' life stories, in addition to numerous participant observations among the group of retired women. I conducted interviews with members of the Senior Citizens' Club of the Ochota Cultural Centre, who are beneficiaries of the activities of the Active Alternative House in ul. Puławska. Furthermore, I conducted research among informal traders selling produce around Hala Mirowska. The participants in my study exhibited a range of lifestyles and daily activities. The participants differed in terms of the ways in which they spent their free time, as well as in relation to their financial and social circumstances. However, despite these differences, they shared a common ground in terms of their place of residence, namely Warsaw, and their retirement age, which marked a pivotal shift in their daily lives. This transition, which can be described as systemic, led to a transformation in their personal circumstances.

In my interviews, through the lens of eating habits, I sought to gain insight into the related and creating such habits realities of the women who shared their life stories with me and to reconstruct the interviewees'

narratives about changes in their everyday lives. I inquired what they ate and what they used to eat, how they cooked and how they had done it in the past. I asked whether they currently provided meals for their loved ones and whether they did so in the past. I explored how their attitudes towards food preparation have evolved over time, particularly in relation to their changing closest social circles. Such conversations facilitated an understanding of how their consumption options and needs, as well as their financial and personal circumstances, were evolving. Furthermore, it became evident that alterations in the eating habits of the women I encountered signified a transformation of the forms of their daily responsibilities and care work towards themselves and others.

The conversations we had in the field about food turned naturally into stories of constant work – both the professional one, a departure from which led to the crucial transition to retirement, and the care work. My interviewees were not afforded the reduction of obligation to the latter by any external institution or structure.

The formative food habits, which include cooking for themselves and their loved ones, are linked to a range of other necessary and often invisible housekeeping and care work carried out in the home by the women I met, regardless of their age. The reduction of their daily care responsibilities was primarily due to the eventual passing away of loved ones rather than due to advanced age or changes in their employment circumstances. The caregiving work undertaken had a range of different meanings for them, and depending on the context, it became a burden or a bond-building and desirable element of reality.

Dimensions of continuous household management in the past

The professional activities of the female interviewees fall within the period of the Communist regime. The majority of my female interviewees retired in the 1990s, prompted by the structural changes that were occurring at the time. In their professional roles, they fulfilled the two previously mentioned responsibilities: generating income and managing the

household. It involved attending to the needs of the entire household, with minimal consideration for their own needs. If husbands did engage in the daily chores, it was typically within the category of 'helping,' as domestic duties were not part of their competence. The involvement of primarily male cohabitants in the daily, necessary activities of the household was contingent upon their goodwill. It was not the case for the daughters, who had socialised from childhood to perform their duties and partly relieve their mothers, who, nevertheless, bore the majority of responsibility for the daily running of the household.

In their case, this time-consuming work was not a matter of choice; it was a matter of course. When I asked them if they cooked, I usually heard them say, 'I had to!' This became a particularly inalienable duty, especially when raising small children – then my interlocutors were busy from early in the morning until late in the evening, constantly preparing the first and second breakfast for all those working and studying, dinners, lunches, as well as the half-finished products for the following days. For most of my female interviewees, fulfilling the role of a good wife was equivalent to taking care of the house and children, cooking delicious food, and making preserves.

Notably, the responsibility mentioned above did not inherently possess a distinctly negative quality for the respondents. In the recollections of the retired women I have encountered, the period of caring for the family in their youth is frequently recalled with sentiments of tenderness and affection. Feeding is synonymous with the daily, unquestionable proximity of children and husband. A significant number of women I have encountered describe their previous roles within the domestic sphere as a form of imprisonment, limiting their agency. However, a comparable proportion associate these responsibilities with the happiness-generating fulfilment of their roles as partners and mothers. At that time, they aspired to prepare a diverse and tasty menu in their kitchen, melding discourses of nutritional cuisine with a desire to nourish their family with a cake or a satisfying traditional dish, such as a fried chop of meat.

The sharing of recipes and recommendations on how to obtain the best ingredients between girlfriends and the family's appreciation of the fruits

of their efforts socialised their work. Providing daily, ongoing care filled the adult lives of my female interviewees.

Given its evident and indispensable nature, the caregiving work in question has become a form of bonding expression of care and an onerous, life-consuming duty from which there is no escape, accompanying the subjects' entire lives and the relationships they built. Feeding dependents shaped their leisure activities in the past, and at the same time, in the life stories narrated to me, was linked to an inalienable sense of duty. Preparing and sharing food was a key and inalienable part of everyday life and had pragmatic, social, and emotional significance. One interviewee, for instance, described her experience of cooking in the past as follows:

Oh, I don't bake anymore, no. Oh, I used to have to when my dad was alive. I had a husband and a child, and my father was still there, so, like I say, lunches straight after work! So I say I wouldn't manage. And before that, I had to... I'm telling you, it was straight after work and at work it was like that: What did you cook, anything good? Oh, please, I'd love the recipe!

Well, listen, this, this, this and this. I'll try it! The next day, listen, I tried to do your dumplings or cutlets or something, something, something. They didn't work out for me, because something there, something there; aaaaaaa, because you didn't have that thing. And that was the discussion most of the time.... It's such a cool memory! (25. 11. OKO).

Dimensions of reclaimed and forced caregiving work in retirement

For many of my female interviewees, retirement correlated in time with the full independence of their children and sometimes the death of their partners. In such a situation, their first chance in their lives to get time off was correlated with professional and social marginalisation. It may have been a long-awaited chance for them to relax, but it did not necessarily become one. In many cases, the purchasing power of the women I met who were living alone on pension benefits was much lower than before. If not working meant a sharp deterioration in their financial situation, they

opted for a variety of strategies to remedy this – from continuing to work to visiting community fridges or trading informally at the market. Such activities were intended to both improve their financial situation and ensure their place in the community while preventing retirement from being equated to loneliness in an empty house.

My interviewees from the Senior Citizens' Club could afford to enjoy active, community-based leisure activities thanks to organisations that provide opportunities for senior citizens. However, participation in these activities requires them to have the financial resources, physical fitness and freedom to manage their time to do so. The beneficiaries of the community fridge at the Active Alternative House did not enjoy these privileges. They spent most of their free time exploring food initiatives that allowed them to function and gave them space to spend time with other people. The female interviewees I met at Hala Mirowska were in a similar situation. Insofar as they declared, they traded not only because they needed to earn extra money but also to spend their free time with friends.

The key point for me was that this leisure time gained for the first time in their lives did not mean, for the retired women I met, that they were relieved of their commitment to providing care work – a commitment to others and themselves. It comprised a number of levels of expected activities, both those expected by others and those initiated by the women themselves.

Firstly, they were still obligated to care for their loved ones who were still dependent on them. It was particularly the case for married women, who were still burdened with the expectation to cook for themselves and their husbands and take care of the house. From their husbands' perspective, the wives' obligations towards the household had hardly changed despite the children moving out. Some of my female interviewees found this an unpleasant burden. Still, for others, it provided a sense of normality and security. After all, some of my female interviewees declared that they really enjoyed cooking and feeding. The externally imposed compulsion to work as a carer also applied to the obligation to care for older people in the family in need of assistance. It was usually imposed on them by their extended family, for example, by their brothers. They accepted this

obligation unquestioningly, regardless of their deteriorating financial and physical conditions.

Secondly, they took on caregiving roles for many people who did not ask for help. These were, above all, adult children whom their mothers continued to feed with specially prepared cakes and meals despite their independence. Meals were handed out in the form of lunches and cakes left on the doormat in exchange for bringing groceries or as preserves in jars – handed out personally or sent to distant towns if the adult child had moved far away.

Thirdly, the retired women I met formed an extensive network of relationships with others of a similar age. They brought each other lunches, cleaned the homes of the infirm who were fifteen years older than they were, and helped each other in difficult situations. It was vividly demonstrated during the pandemic.

> P: I don't like to cook; I try to eat everything, I mean.
> N: Aha.
> P: For my husband, I cooked what he liked, but I myself always ate whatever, basically. Sandwiches...
> N: Aha... And now you don't cook anymore?
> P: I don't cook anymore. Only now I have to cook for my brother who's had a stroke, and his arms are all twisted, so he can't do anything (22. 02. OKO).

Many interviewees asserted that their offspring's material independence made the ritual of feeding and serving meals to others a voluntary ritual rather than an obligatory daily occurrence. As adults, they adapted their meal preparation to suit the needs of others. When this changed, ceasing to feed others, and therefore themselves, became commonplace in the lives of my female interviewees. Nevertheless, preparing food for others was described by my interviewees as an essential part of their current lives. They saw it as a duty, not a matter of choice. Sharing food with loved ones is socially important to them and makes it easier for them to cope with cooking too many meals for a single person. The women I met during my research were not used to cooking just for themselves.

In facing the reality of now being alone, they had to abandon cupboards full of large crockery, cutlery, and pots and switch to a few of the same dishes used every day. For some, the diminishing duty of feeding loved ones became a burden and a daily and material reminder of an unsatisfactory private situation — the effort put into preparing meals used to be rewarded by admiration and appreciation from loved ones. Now, many of my respondents lack the space to cook or bake. It is not an unequivocally positive experience for them, no matter how much arduous work caregiving used to involve.

> N: And do you like to cook?
> Q: Do I like to?
> N: Mhm.
> P: I do. I do enjoy it. That's all that's left for me at the moment. And also...
> N: All that's left?
> P: Well, cooking is all that's left for me. Well, that I'm going to prepare something there and they're just waiting for my...
> N: Yes? Do they come to you for that?
> P: AND... you know, they come there, I rather pack the soup for them in jars... some boxes there,
> for those dumplings... For example! Pancakes with spinach! How do they take it all in...
> I was looking at pancakes with feta cheese... They eat... You never know what someone will like... (23. 11. OKO).

Not cooking – liberation or abandonment?

My interviewees were effectively reclaiming feeding, perceiving it as a way of maintaining closeness and a relationship of dependence. Those with children or grandchildren pass on the meals they prepare to them, making what they would also cook for themselves dependent on the taste of others. Offering food and inviting them over became a regular reason for meeting their loved ones. They donate cakes, sweets, and other specialities that, as they said, they alone knew how to make. They also feed by

inviting the family to celebratory dinners, which provide another opportunity to get together and demonstrate their desire to help.

My female interviewees also present meals to their friends. It has a twofold meaning: on the one hand, it is a ritual of sharing a meal, which serves as a celebration and bonding; on the other hand, it is a very concrete material help expressed in a socially accepted form. The women I interviewed gave food to their loved ones regardless of their financial situation.

> P: You know, you have to manage so that it's enough. Well, you know, from my pension, and my son is not working, so you have to know what you can and what you can't. Sometimes, I still distribute what's left.
> N: To your friends?
> K: Yes.
> N: It's like an all-encompassing pension.
> K: (laughs) No, no... But if I've got it, I'll take it. I can't eat it myself, so I'll give it to them (22. 06. ADA).

The move away from providing constant care for others was a cause for joy for many of my female interviewees. It meant the materialisation of a long-awaited right not to cook, something they had not experienced since starting a family. However, the solitude meant that even though they were suddenly deprived of double incomes and their salaries turned into lower pensions, they were able to spend their entire monthly income on themselves for the first time in their lives. The absence of the need for professional and care work opened up new, previously unknown free moments for them. These conditions applied most to the privileged women I met at the seniors' home. They were there because they had chosen this lifestyle, and they enjoyed the opportunity to decide their days. For them, retirement did not mean poverty and loss of autonomy; it meant increasing social and economic independence.

> N: You were the one who cooked for everyone, right?
> P: Yes. For everyone.
> N: And now?

> P: Well, now I live more for myself. When I go to visit my daughters, because they live out there in such a two-family house, I'm a guest there. I don't do anything on the allotment. Because we bought an allotment there once, and they grow roses, flowers, trees, and generally vegetables and fruit there. I was so fed up with that allotment that now I can't look at any allotment at all. When my friends are delighted, they buy allotments, I say no. I've worked so hard for so many years, now when I go to my daughters, I'm a guest (28. 10. OKO).

Summary

Being able to choose whether and how much to cook, care for, and feed one's loved ones, or, on the contrary, choosing to do away with existing obligations, is in itself a privilege not available to many of my interviewees. Some of the women I interviewed were still bearing the burden of caregiving work despite their deteriorating physical, material, and social situations. It was especially true for those who provided constant care for loved ones due to illness or age. Although it might seem that older retired women are not suitable to take on this duty, this was precisely what happened to my interviewees. They were responsible for caring for their parents, siblings, or neighbours, with the tacit approval of others who could also take on this role, such as siblings, children, or the state. They knew they were the only ones who could care for a loved one in need and accompany them through illness and old age, continuing the invisible work of providing care during their own retirement.

The retired women I spoke to were individuals who had been professionally active in the Polish People's Republic, but also after the system transformation and retired in neoliberal, capitalist Poland. They experienced 'two full-time jobs' – they generated income and took care of the household. Despite this, their pensions tended to be low because their active employment was shorter than men's, often due to childcare and early retirement due to structural changes. Throughout their lives, they

performed endless caregiving work for the benefit of others. When they finally gained free time, although in many cases, they still had to perform activities needed for survival, they continued to engage in caregiving work for the benefit of others. This work had different dimensions for them – it was a duty, a daily burden, but also an important part of their relationship with loved ones and a way of building a support network. A common element of this work is its long-term duration, a permanent commitment to provide unpaid, socially invisible work for others. Unpaid caregiving work, recently so prominently considered in mainstream economic thought, is a key element in my interviewees' lives, undergoing structural changes and transformations in their private circumstances, and it invariably shapes their day-to-day existence.

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