



CIPRIANI COLLEGE
OF LABOUR AND CO-OPERATIVE STUDIES

**SOCIAL REPRODUCTION: A MOTHER'S
DILEMMA BETWEEN CAREWORK
AND PAID WORK**

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Social Reproduction: A Mother's Dilemma between Carework and Paid Work

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“My daughter is bright, but she has fallen behind... On Monday, I will tell them, ‘thank you very much but I have to leave, to help my daughter’ ”.

Lisa is a single parent who lost her partner to street violence. She is now solely responsible for caring for her daughter. She recognised that her daughter's academic performance had declined and decided that her best option was to resign from her job to care for her daughter and prepare her for the future.

In western contemporary societies, women's employment is characterized by prolonged withdrawals from the workforce or a reduction in working hours due to their frequently assumed role as primary caregivers within the family. However, not only is it increasingly difficult to re-enter work, particularly at the same level as they were when they left, but these interruptions lead to cumulative disadvantage over the life course in the form of economic dependency, reduced old-age pension entitlements and increased risk of old-age poverty.

Care work refers to a complex web of activities that sustain and reproduce life. Women shoulder a disproportionate share of care responsibilities, which prevents their participation in the labour force, which is further exacerbated by factors such as low education levels, limited job opportunities, poor infrastructure, rural residence and inadequate care support systems.

There are a number of emerging theories which offer competing perspectives of care work, such as the 'devaluation perspective' which argues that care work is badly rewarded because it is associated with women; often women of colour. The process of 'housewifisation' of women's labour argues that women's productive contribution to the market is hidden and subsequently devalued. Another perspective is offered by the 'public

good framework' which ascertains that the low pay is the result of the market's failure to reward public goods.

However, in the context of care work and the role of parent's in education, 'social reproduction theory' advances the view that the work that goes into maintaining and reproducing people, such as childcare, education, healthcare, and emotional support, prioritizes children's education because it is central to the reproduction of labour, skills and social order across generations. Consequently, it is considered a societal investment. The social reproduction debate first originated with a focus on housework and their 'wagelessness'. It recognized that reproductive work had been socially constructed as the realm of non-value and as a result, had been excluded from discussions of value-generation. More recently, the concept deepens debates about domestic labour and women's economic roles in capitalist societies. It reflects what is considered socially and culturally acceptable for care work, and reflects the balance of gender, class, and race power relations.

Interestingly, most of the work involved in social reproduction can be taken up by various actors and institutions, for example, care for the elderly can be performed by the state, a private institution or the family. This dynamic is believed to represent the devolving and downloading of responsibility for key aspects of social reproduction as it moves from the state to the individual. By default, and by design, women within the family pick up the work that is not provided publicly and is not affordable personally.

Female labour force participation is highly influenced by the presence of young children and childcare responsibilities. While, research often focuses on women's careers and consequences of labour market withdrawals in the years shortly after childbearing, or the care that is later provided to parents, or older spouses due to frailty or deteriorating health conditions ; we note that 3.4% of prime-age adults;

those aged 25-54, reside in lone parent households; predominantly as single mothers. As a result, joining the labour force is not optional for women like Lisa, given that they are the sole providers in the household.

Notwithstanding, mothers are often compelled to choose between their career and their children's education. This is driven by the lack of or weakening of traditional family support, and the rise of single parent households, thus, leading to an increased need for non-family care in the form of afterschool support for school-aged children. This will not only contribute to the child's education, but will also ensure continuity of the mother's employment.

Consequently, it is necessary to advocate for the provision of out-of-school care support for school-aged children, through traditional community services in the form of after-school clubs, and workplace solutions in the form of flexible work schedules, teleworking, reduced hours or voluntary part-time work. However, a key component for success is to address and mitigate employer scepticism through evidence-based research to gain their buy-in.