

Depletion, Intersectionality and the Limits of Social Policy:

Child Carers in Mexico City

Jean Grugel, Susanna Macias and Shirin M Rai

Abstract

This paper makes a dual contribution. First, it adds a novel intersectional perspective to studies of depletion through social reproduction, examining the depletion experienced by children and adolescents caring for their younger siblings in Mexico City. We show how the depletion child carers experience is shaped by a combination of age, low income, other forms of work in and outside the home and gender, through the examples of three poor young people who provide everyday, regular care to siblings. Secondly, we explore the limitations of cash transfer welfare programmes by examining their failure to address the needs of children who provide care within the family and show how misperceptions by social policy makers of the experiences of young carers limit the capacity of social policies to make a difference to their wellbeing. The paper underlines the importance of greater recognition of social reproductive work by poor children and adolescents and of the intersectional depletion they experience, both within social policy and in academic research.

Depletion, Intersectionality and the Limits of Social Policy: Child Carers in Mexico City

This article sets out to extend the feminist debate on care and unpaid work to children and adolescents. Feminist political economy has consistently drawn attention to the reliance of the formal economy on women's unpaid, under-paid and under-valued social reproductive work, and the consequent costs to them in income, recognition, dignity, self-worth, physical and mental wellbeing. These losses have been conceptualised as depletion through social reproduction (Rai et al 2014). Children and adolescents also engage in social reproductive work particularly, though far from exclusively in low and middle-income countries, with girls more likely to be providers of unpaid care within the family. Yet, while there is now considerable research on the impact of paid labour by children outside the home and its impact on their physical and mental health (Grugel and Poley 2012, Fontana and Grugel 2015) there is only limited scholarship on children's social reproductive work, especially outside the UK, Europe and North America (Camilletti et al 2018).

Our research makes two contributions. First, we add an intersectional perspective to studies of depletion through social reproduction by emphasising how age, poverty, paid work outside the home and gender intertwine to shape lived experiences of children who engage in care work. As with adults, gender shapes which children do social reproductive work, with girls predominantly taking on this role, though boys also contribute, in particular when there are no older girls in the family. But children's experiences of depletion are also shaped by age, children's subordinate position in society and the family, and by poverty and marginality. Empirical evidence for these claims comes from a pilot study of child carers in Mexico City. We then make a second, linked contribution by placing the needs of these children in the context of Mexico's social investments, mainly cash transfer programmes, which were designed with the intention of benefiting

poor children and their families (Blofield 2019). These programmes have been heavily criticised for not meeting the needs of poor women (Bradshaw 2008); we suggest that they also fail to consider properly the needs of poor children who provide unpaid care. As such, there is a disconnect between Mexico's social policies and the needs of child carers. This constitutes a missed opportunity to design more effective social policies and leaves child carers, poor girls in particular, without much needed social protection that would enable them to lead more fulfilled lives. In the process, this omission reduces Mexico's chances of achieving the targets set by the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular Goal 5.4, which calls for the provision of adequate quality services and "the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family as nationally appropriate".

Towards an Intersectional Understanding of Depletion through Social Reproduction

Rai et al (2014) identified a range of human costs that can be incurred through care work, which they call 'depletion through social reproduction'. Depletion, they argue, occurs when human resource outflows exceed resource inflows as a result of carrying out social reproductive work over a threshold of sustainability, making it harmful for those engaged in it (Rai et al 2014: 4). They further argue that recognising and measuring depletion can lead to strategies to address these harms, which they identify as mitigation (individual), replenishment (state and non-state actors) and transformation (structural). Studies of care work or depletion through social reproduction have mainly focused on the labour of adult women (Elson, 2000; Rai et al 2014). There is little child-focused, intersectional research that considers the ways in which age, income and other factors might intersect with gender in terms of the experience of depletion and little firm, comparative evidence of how care work depletes children, girls and boys, despite an assumption that the costs of unpaid care are generally mediated by income (Chopra and Zambelli 2017).

Initially, it was assumed that care by children occurs only in 'exceptional' circumstances, such as where parents are chronically or seriously ill (Aldridge and Becker 1993, Becker, Aldridge and Deardon 1998) or in HIV/AIDS-affected contexts in Sub-Saharan Africa

(Robson et al. 2006; Becker 2007; Bray 2009; Evans 2010). But in fact, research suggests that there are approximately 30,000 child carers under 17 in the UK who provide significant levels of care for family members and as many as 175,000 who provide some level of care (Becker 2007). In Canada, Stamatopolos (2015) calculated for 2006 just over 1 million unpaid young carers, though she takes a more expansive age definition of 15-24. Figures for countries in the Global South are less firmly known. Yet patchy service provision for working class and poor parents and the chronically ill and disabled, along with growing numbers of women in formal and informal labour markets, would suggest that poor children in low and middle income countries are even more likely to provide care work, even in circumstances when they do so at cost to themselves. As Chopra and Zambelli (2017) observe, there is, in practice, a high prevalence of intergenerational transfer of care to children especially in relation to sibling care, as our research here also suggests.

Research on child carers has not yet fully connected with studies of adult depletion (and vice-versa). What we know about child carers has generally been framed by the sociology of childhood literature, which has identified above all, the agency and capacities of children (James 2004). As such, researchers have sometimes identified empowering aspects to care work for children and argued that the provision of care by children is not necessarily an intrinsically harmful practice, suggesting for example that it enables them to make a contribution to their households (Cass 2009; Skovdal 2009). Some scholars point out, that it can foster a sense of self-esteem (Robson et al. 2006; Abebe & Kjørholt 2009; Evans 2010). By participating in care work, children can also come to understand the collective responsibility for care, pushing back against the individualised, neoliberal framings of society (Lutterel 2013).

The significance of children's agency in providing unpaid care within their family is important – though we should be alert to the fact that children's agency in deciding to take on unpaid care or in how much of it they deliver may in practice be extremely constrained (Chopra and Zambelli 2017). It is nonetheless remarkable that very few studies have asked whether children and young people are being 'harmed' or depleted in the process, with Stamapoloulos (2018: 182) something of an exception here; she identifies a 'care penalty' that affects young carers in the future as well as the present. A

focus on children's agency, we suggest, needs to be complemented by an acknowledgement of the harms that child carers may also experience. Put differently the agency-centred focus found in sociology of childhood approaches should enter into more systematic dialogue with feminist research on depletion through social reproduction. In this way, we can identify whether and how far the harms caused by depletion are similar or different to those experienced by adult women, and the impact of age and children's status in the household. Children, for example, may not be listened to in the home, for example, if they complain about tiredness and the impact of exhaustion on their future wellbeing may be even greater than on adults. There is already some evidence that care by children leads to lower rates of schooling (Robson et al. 2006), and that these children may also experience depression, stress, anxiety and stigma (Boyden et al. 2016; Camilletti et al 2018). But neither the severity of these costs nor at what point on 'the caregiving continuum' (Becker 2007) costs kick in is clear – nor is there research as to whether more imaginative social policies could help mitigate these costs.

Of course, gender plays a central role in who cares, for children as well as for adults, with girls significantly more likely than boys to spend time on care and as children grow, the gendered inequity in care provision tends to increase (UNICEF 2016). This is accentuated by the fact that girls tend to take on more indoor work than boys, who are instead frequently more involved in outdoor activities (Chopra and Zambelli 2017). But, as we show later in our discussion of welfare provision for poor families in Mexico, these gendered distinctions, and the significance of care by children in general, do not feed into national social policy provision.

Case and method

This paper is based on a pilot study that rests empirically on research with both child carers – one boy, two girls - and social policymakers and social workers who interact directly with vulnerable children in Mexico City. Although Mexico is a high-middle income country, poverty levels are high, increasing from 45.5% to 46.2% between 2012 and 2014 (UNICEF 2018). Up to half of all Mexican children experience poverty. About 25% (10 million approximately) live in food poverty; 8% (3.3 million) are in families that have less than one dollar a day per capita expenditure; and 24% live in profoundly

inadequate housing (UNICEF 2018). Poverty in Mexico City stands at around 40%. The number of female-headed households in Mexico City has increased steadily over the last 30 years and, while Chant (2007) rightly warns against the assumption that children in female-headed households are always worse off than those where there is also an adult male present, it is also the case that becoming a female-headed household brings changes to roles within the family and less overall income (Liu et al 2016), both of which may impact on how care is organised.

Our research took place in the socially mixed neighbourhood of Tacuba, an area rich in national significance because of its pre-Hispanic origins, with a population of around 11,971. Tacuba was selected chiefly for reasons of access. Although children carrying out household and care tasks can be found across the city, we knew from other research that encouraging children to be open about their intimate lives would be difficult. We expected children and their parents to be reticent with outsiders partly in case it would affect their inclusion in social programmes or open the family up to stigma and censure (Punch 2002). Moreover, rising insecurity in Mexico City has led to fears of abduction and cases of kidnapping figure prominently in newspapers and social media (Ochoa 2011), meaning that parents are generally unwilling to leave children alone with strangers. One of the authors is from Tacuba, where her family still lives, and we hoped this would help us with access. This proved to be the case; but, even so, the field work was not without difficulties. Initially, although children could be observed carrying out shopping in the market while taking care of smaller children and supervising them on the streets, they were reluctant to talk, despite reassurances about confidentiality and anonymity. In the end, personal links, testimonials and patience delivered three detailed interviews with child carers, shorter interviews with their parents and the opportunity to observe the children's and their families' daily routines.

The family situation of each of the children we interviewed is significantly different, with one living in a family home with their mother; another sleeping in an aunt's home, whilst working for her parents; and a third living with her mother in a shack in the garbage dump. The children come from homes with different levels of income, poverty and parental aspiration; and, from what we could judge through our observations, different levels of appreciation within the family of the work the children do. We were therefore

able to observe how differences of income and levels of social inclusion matter for children's depletion, even though the study was small. We were also able to reflect on the gendered dimension of intersectional depletion, moreover, by comparing the experiences of the male child carer with that of two girls, recognising of course that any observations we make are based upon a very small sample. It was striking to us the children interviewed shared experiences of depletion, including isolation, extreme tiredness and loss of education, despite the pride they sometimes felt in contributing to their families. Their experiences provide us with an important, grounded starting point for assessing and reflecting on the depletion experienced by children who care, and opening up a discussion of what policies of replenishment might ultimately consist of.

In order to explore childcare work in the context of Mexico's expanding social policy framework, a set of more formal, semi-structured interviews were held with policymakers. These included a social worker, child protection officer and psychologist employed by the *Sistema Nacional para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia* (DIF), the national government body responsible for child protection and family policy in Mexico City and employees of a large transnational charity that runs support programmes for vulnerable children. These interviews complemented a desk-based analysis of Mexican social policies and were designed to probe the disconnect between Mexican social policies and the needs of child carers, explore policy makers' attitudes to childcares and establish the discursive frames through which they understand childcare work. They enabled us to assess some of the barriers in the way of programmes that could help mitigate the costs of caregiving by children.

Ethical approval for the research was granted by the University of York, where the first named author is based, and the data stored. Consent was given for all interviews and these, along with field observations, were then transcribed. In analysing the data, given the small numbers of interviews, we opted to read the transcriptions iteratively in order to understand experiences and viewpoints of the children and policymakers, and identify patterns, rather than using a data analysis system such as N-VIVO. All organisations and interviewees were anonymized.

Being a child carer: the experiences of José, Maria and Lydia

In this section we present the experiences gleaned from our interviews with three childcarers and their parents in Mexico City, along with our observations of their lives. All three mothers said they were not recipients of state welfare programs. They relied on generating their own income to survive and get by.

José lives in a modest house, with his mother and siblings. His father died a few years earlier in a building site accident. José works outside the home, doing odd jobs and recycling rubbish. He also cares for his younger siblings. Aged 15, he is the eldest of five; there are also two boys aged 10 and 8, and twins (one girl, one boy) aged 4. His mother sells accessories near the market, close to home. Despite good grades at school, José had left school a year earlier. The reasons were complex. He wanted to help his mother financially and emotionally, and there were also issues of stigma in relation to his and his family's poverty that were making school unpleasant for him. José did not leave school to become a carer. He initially found work as a bricklayer, with his uncle. But he was the youngest on the building site, and, when his uncle changed jobs, Jose lost his. But even when he was working full time outside the home, Jose would look after his siblings once he arrived home, trying to keep the younger ones 'calm' – as he put it - and ensuring they went to bed at a reasonable time. He also helped them with school work, if he could. Jose found building site financially rewarding, but very tiring. He says he only slept six hours a night and worked six days a week.

When we spoke with him, Jose was still working outside the home, irregularly loading trolleys for the local informal street businesses. He gets paid around 20 pesos (80 pence) per shift, which goes to his mother who manages the family income. He earns a similar amount working sometimes for local shop owners, usually late afternoon or evening. He has also taken on more care responsibilities for his younger siblings. The second eldest child (who attends school sporadically) sometimes stays with their uncle, leaving Jose in charge during the day of the twins, aged four, and the eight year old, who does not attend school owing to the fact that he was not registered as birth (birth registration is required in Mexico for access to education, welfare, voting etc). The balance of providing care for the younger children has shifted between his mother and José such that, when his mother

is at home, 'she helps me take care of them', as he puts it. His care roles include making sure that the twins 'do not get into mischief', buying food and cooking for them on a daily basis.

Jose says he is happy, seems close to his mother and does not regard the work he does as burdensome:

'I do not think of it as a responsibility. I help because I like it, because my mother has never told me something like, [I have to do it] because I'm the oldest sibling. My uncle said to me, it is true, that I need to help my mother.'

He is also allowed to keep some of the money he earns outside the home:

'Sometimes my mother tells me not to give her the money I earn, that I can keep it, but still I give her half and I keep the rest'.

Yet he also experiences depletion as a result of his care responsibilities. The combination of caring for his siblings and evening/night work means that his isolation from his peers, which was already marked when he left school because of poverty, has increased. He is losing touch with the friends he had at school, most of whom who remain in education. José chooses to help his family and care for his siblings, then, and he feels valued for doing so. But there are costs in isolation, loss of education, diminishing social ties with young people of his own age and limitations on his chances of full-time paid work.

Maria is 14. She also combines work outside the home with care responsibilities within it. Maria's parents run a market stall and she works there six days a week. Her education has been irregular, and she had left school some months before we spoke to her. She is not paid for her work on the stall since her labour is seen as part of the family economy and therefore has less financial independence than José. Maria sleeps in her aunt's house after work while her parents tend to sleep in the van where they store their goods, where she takes care of her younger brother, aged seven, who also lives with her aunt. She does the shopping, laundry, takes her brother to school before work and tries to provide him with emotional support and guidance. She also carries out domestic work in her aunt's

house, including helping 'with the cleaning of the house, food preparation, shopping, cleaning the bathroom, making the bed, etc.' Her days are long and very busy.

Physical markers of depletion are very evident. Maria looked under-nourished and says she is exhausted. She has little energy left at the end of the day, especially on rainy days when she is wet through all day. Maria also shows signs of emotional exhaustion. She finds caring for her brother very stressful, though less so now than in the past when both of them were younger: 'I was always trying to ensure he didn't fall over when he was small.... I was afraid of taking care of him. I was afraid of not holding him correctly'. Maria worries that her brother will disappear or somehow go missing, especially since working on the stall means she is sometimes late to pick him up from school. She finds school pick-ups extremely stressful:

'sometimes it is six o'clock so I am late... And because it is late and sometimes I cannot find him at school, then I am afraid that he has escaped somewhere. But, fortunately, nothing has happened ever'.

Like Jose, the fact that Maria's time is so entirely bound up with domestic and care responsibilities has had a considerable impact on her social life. She cannot go out in the evening and is losing touch with friends. She experiences isolation in the evenings when she is generally on her own caring for her brother. She cannot leave the house because her parents and aunt lock them in, for safety reasons. Doing 'adult' type activities – working and caring - is, she says, much harder than being at school: 'carrying stuff, selling, being active, walking, standing most of the day, so much that I am super tired of my feet'. Nevertheless, she says that the work she does for her brother and her family is done 'with love'. She sees the care work she does as being about preparing to be an adult woman. She thinks that combining care and family work is preparation for marriage and that if her future husband asks her to cook, for example, she will know how to do it. For Maria, then, her care work is 'naturalised' by her gender, in contrast to José, who saw a certain anomaly in the domestic and care work he carried out, attributing it to the death of his father and its impact on his family. This gendered difference carries over into financial reward; while José's mother sometimes allowed him to keep a part of his income, perhaps

in recognition of the fact that, as a male, he has a right to money, Maria's labour is seen something that 'belongs' to the family.

Lydia is 13 and lives in the rubbish dump next to the market, with two younger siblings and her mother. Her father died the previous year from diabetes, and her mother suffers from the same illness. The family has always lived from recycling rubbish – they live where they work. The dump is dirty, rat-infested and lacks privacy and access to running water. Lydia attends school very irregularly. Her mother sees recycling as the children's future, as well as current, work; she has never applied for a cash transfer programme or school scholarships and does not regard schooling as important. She takes the view that her children have to learn

'very young that life is not easy. They need to learn how to do the job that I do. They have to learn how to work the rubbish so they can find clothes that they like and then wear, or shoes or toys'.

Lydia's working day begins at 5.00 am when her mother 'yells', as she says, at the children to get up and start work. Lydia does not keep any money earned from her recycling. In addition, she also takes on a range of regular domestic and caring responsibilities. She has particular responsibilities for her brothers who, as Lydia puts it, 'get up to trouble'. This means her day tends to run seamlessly from recycling to caring for them. She recycles between 5am and 7 am, then goes to school with her brothers, or, more usually, takes them there and returns to the dump. At 1.30 pm, she picks up her siblings from their school and tries to care for them as best she can in the afternoon, whilst continuing to recycle. She sometimes does the cooking. She ensures that the younger children are as clean as they can be and tries to help her siblings learn to read and write. Like Jose and Maria, her day is very long and there is no time for friendships or social activities with people of her own age, Like Maria, she complains of constant exhaustion. Such is her tiredness, that she was unable to talk in depth about how she felt, and when she did speak, she was interrupted by her mother reminding her to keep recycling. Of the three children interviewed, Lydia's depletion was most extreme. The extent of the family's marginality and their precarious financial position meant that even the small amount of money Lydia earned for the family through recycling was significant, with the result that she worked

extremely long hours, alongside providing care for her siblings. Moreover, the almost constant care she provided to her siblings, which contributed to her tiredness and took up so much of her time, was largely unacknowledged, either by herself or her mother.

Jose, Maria and Lydia: what's the harm?

Depletion in adult women is associated with diminished health and wellbeing, depending of course on social context and income (Rai et al 2014). Research with UK child carers has identified a series of similar harms, even when the child carers love those they care for, and they do so willingly. These commonly include loneliness, tiredness, anxiety and difficulties in education (Piiroinen 2017). The accounts of Jose, Maria and Lydia suggest that they too are frequently tired, lonely and isolated and find the responsibilities they take on daunting. But the depletion experienced by these children was also marked by gender differences and the extent of poverty and deprivation they and their families experience and other work, paid and unpaid, they were responsible for.

Jose and Maria say they care because they love their families; Lydia did not say so, though she did not rebel against caring for her siblings, as far as we could tell. All three accept that their care work enables the family to function. Clearly, all exercise agency in providing care for their siblings; but at the same time, they all also felt that they have little choice in practice. And their willingness to care did not reduce their physical and emotional depletion, expressed in terms of tiredness, worry and anxiety. All three children were physically drained. Their education had been severely impacted; none of the children attended school regularly and two had already dropped out completely. All three mentioned feeling 'different' in school and alluded to the possibility that they had been bullied, though they did not go into details. All three also drew attention to the fact that they were not free to meet up with their peers at times of the day normally associated with 'leisure'. The children all combined care with other forms of domestic and paid work, along with (irregular) schooling in Lydia's case. None seemed to get enough sleep. The extent of their depletion varied according to both gender and the extent of their poverty and living conditions. Their exhaustion and depletion, then, were not caused only by being carers; care intersected with poverty, other adult-like responsibilities such as work

outside the home and, in the case of Lydia and Maria, their own gendered expectations and those of others.

Also striking was the fact that, despite the visibility of other children in Tacuba apparently living similar lives marked by care and domestic work in a context of poverty, the children, and most especially Jose and Maria, were defensive about what they did, and sometimes wanted to minimise their input into the family, contradicting themselves about the time they gave to domestic and care work. Jose in particular changed his mind several times about the scope of his responsibilities and the time his mother spent at home and he was wary of listing the responsibilities he took on, suggesting that he may have thought it was not fitting work for a boy. All three children had a sense that their lives departed from recognised ideals of childhood and family.

To sum up, Jose, Maria and Lydia choose, to a greater or less extent, to act as unpaid carers. But, partly as a consequence, they live tired, anxious lives, aware of some of the deficiencies they experience, including educational losses and social isolation. The children all talked about cooking, shopping, cleaning, etc. as core parts of the duties they assumed, along with care of emotional and practical care for their siblings (and in the case of Lydia, for her mother who was unwell). The extensive care provided to younger siblings on a basis so regular and sustained that it simply forms part of their daily lives contributes to the children's social exclusion and multiplies the chances that they will continue to experience marginalisation and vulnerability as adults. This does not mean that the positive elements of being care providers should be overlooked, but it does underline the importance of both identifying the costs of care provision by children and the need to consider how welfare spending might mitigate these costs.

Child carer work as exclusion: the limits of Mexican social policy

Although our participants were not beneficiaries of cash transfers programmes, it is important to place our discussion of child carers in a wider social policy landscape. Mexico, as is the case in Latin America in general, has experienced a significant expansion of social policies since the 1990s, and most especially since the 2000s, has taken place mainly via conditional cash transfer policies (Cecchini and Atuesta 2017). Combining the

philosophy of 'human capital' with the principle of targeting, cash transfers provide a range of income-support and conditional safety net schemes in the form of monthly allowances targeted above all at mothers with school-age children (Grugel and Riggirozzi 2018). The targeting of poor women in this way has, overall, extended the numbers of years in education of poor children and improved their nutrition (Papadopoulos and Velazquez Leyer 2016). But feminist scholarship in particular is sceptical as to whether these programmes empower poor women in any way, (Fredman and Goldblatt 2015; Fredman 2015; Goldblatt 2016). Policies have been criticised for entrenching, rather than challenging, gender inequalities (Razavi 2007). We suggest here that the focus on parenting, specifically motherhood, and the 'good family' may be detrimental not only for poor women (Molyneux 2006) but also for children whose lives deviate from traditional patterns and hierarchical family relations, such as child carers. As our interviews with policymakers show, to benefit from the programmes, children are expected to be 'children' in the mould of the western archetype, dependent on their parents and engaged exclusively in study and play. Children whose lives deviate from this model can, intentionally or unintentionally, find themselves excluded from protection.

Mexico has implemented cash transfer social programmes since 1988. However, it was not until 1997 that the most significant programmes, Progresá [Progress], Oportunidades [Opportunities], and Prospera [Prosper], emerged. These targeted mothers in order to provide education, health care and nourishment to children, who were seen as the primary beneficiaries. Mothers were obliged to attend workshops on nutrition and periodic healthcare workshops along with their children. Mothers and schools were both required to show proof that the children's main activity was as fulltime students, which implicitly disincentivised parents from making their children accountable for any other activities, such as caregiving. These programmes were replaced in 2018 Becas [Scholarships] Benito Juárez, which instead targets school students from primary to higher education. The recipients are the students themselves, and the monitoring and performance components have been removed. But the new programmes still offer little to children and adolescents who work act as caregivers.

Our aim in speaking with social policymakers was to explore why social programmes provided so little support to child carers. We wanted to have a clearer picture as to

whether policymakers were aware that children in poor households, especially girls, regularly for extended periods provide care for younger siblings within the home, the kind of tasks they take on and the depletion they experience. And we hoped to ascertain if there was space for new social policies and programmes for reaching out to child carers. We therefore spoke to social policymakers working for both the government and for NGOs. Policymakers' understanding of the issue – the time involved, the sense of responsibility, the tiredness and the loss of time in school - chimed closely with our observations of the lives of Jose, Maria and Lydia and the children's own accounts and there was no noticeable difference between the governmental and non-governmental sectors. One social worker commented:

Within the schools that we have been working with, we have seen that, for example, in the summer school, there were children that did not use to come to the activities because they were working in the business of their parents, or because their parents took them to work the land. Some others did not attend the activities because they were taking care of someone within their families.

But, although they were aware of children doing care work and the various costs they incurred as a result, they did not think it was for the government to address it through social policy interventions. The reasons offered to support this view were various. Some opposed it on cost grounds, arguing that it would be too expensive to contemplate (even though it has never been costed in Mexico, as far as we could tell). Other objections were more evidently normative. In particular, policymakers saw the prevalence of child carers as a consequence of poor parenting and they understood their own role, and the point of the many social programmes that focus on parental and familial investments, as training parents to deliver their responsibilities more effectively. As such, they were wary of creating what they saw as incentives to parents to continue to pass the care burden down across the generations. They also saw child care work as a form of child labour. One interviewee went even further and described child caregiving as a form of child abuse:

It is child abuse... if a child is responsible for taking care of his or her youngest siblings, it is child abuse. We understand that in many cases parents need to work to survive, and that they need to leave their children alone at home. I think it is

child abuse because of lack of care. yes, it is child abuse if a child younger than 18 years old is responsible to take care of the youngest siblings.

Another thought that if children took on care responsibilities, it would cause damage by undermining family hierarchies:

Within the family, there are family roles. When children are treated as adults who care of the youngest, the family roles are not being respected because children cannot assume that responsibility.

The idea that unpaid care by children is a form of gendered harm also emerged in discussions. This sometimes served as a justification for why social policies should seek to eradicate unpaid care work by children rather than provide support to carers. This latter view was sometimes so strong that social workers claimed that boys never provided care in households:

Researcher: what happens if the oldest sibling is a boy and the youngest siblings are girls? The boy goes to work, or he stays at home taking care of his sisters?

Social worker: the boy goes to work, and the mother stays with the girls

It was only when we probed a bit deeper, that some social workers and policy makers acknowledged that childcare work is not as straightforward an issue as they initially claimed. They acknowledged, for example, that boys also provide care, even if they do so differently. But still, the views of social policymakers seemed remarkably conservative on this issue. If these are widely held across the social policy sector as a whole, attitudes to child care work may be one of the barriers in the way of the introduction of policies that might mitigate the burden of their care work. Given the importance of social policy to strategies to combat depletion, we regard this as a vital and urgent area for new research to address.

Concluding Reflections

Where does this research leave us in terms of analysing the depletion experienced by children who care within families? Our data point clearly in the direction of the importance of understanding depletion through an intersectional lens. In the first place, we would suggest that there is an urgent need for further research to understand in more detail how age and other interrelated factors impact on depletion and the meaning of the 'young carer penalty' (Stamatopoulos 2018). Gender is most certainly crucial when it comes to understanding which child will take on the care of siblings (generally, alongside other domestic and family work). When boys like Jose provide care for their siblings, they may be more likely to experience small financial remunerations; at the same time, they may prefer to dissemble a bit as to how much care work they actually do. But other factors such as the extent of poverty and deprivation shape not only the likelihood that children will take on care responsibilities but also how the extent of those responsibilities and of depletion itself. Of the three children we spoke to, Lydia lived the most marginal life; the extent to which caring for her siblings caused her depletion was almost impossible to disentangle from her poverty. Rai et al (2014: 14) have argued that mitigation – individual strategies for reversing depletion – are class sensitive and can 'indeed increase depletion through social reproduction further down the chain'; child carers can be understood in this context to be particularly adversely affected in poor families as families struggle to survive within rigid conditional support structures.

Our research also alerts us to the fact that children who care are agents who accept that they have responsibilities to their family and sometimes actively wish to contribute the family through their labour, even though this labour is framed by social and economic constraints and may engender costs to them. It is important, then, to acknowledge the important work done within sociological studies of childhood that have done so much to emphasise the significance of children's agency, even in constrained circumstances. These studies, in our view, should enter into closer dialogue with feminist approaches in future research on children, unpaid care work and depletion. They serve to remind us that children should be regarded as independent rights-bearing people, in research and policy. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), the most rapidly ratified human rights treaty ever, emphasises the need to see children as 'the holders of their own rights and not passive recipients of charity but empowered actors in their own development' and that policy should be shaped accordingly. The CRC also recognises that

all children should enjoy the same rights, including to protection from harmful work, quality education and leisure time and that these too should be actively promoted.

On ratification of the CRC, governments undertake to deliver the progressive implementation of these rights and recognition of children's agency. They have obligations, therefore, to respond to their needs through social policies and a process of recognition and support, as well support for their families; otherwise there is likely to be a continued tacit acceptance that there are significant numbers of children who live lives without protection because they are regarded as 'outside' accepted models of childhood for reasons of poverty and gender.

Despite these obligations, however, our research suggests that Mexico's social policy framework is not yet tailored in ways that embrace the needs of child carers. Highly gendered and idealised notion of the (middle-class) family and childhood are preventing policy makers in Mexico from responding to the needs of poor children who care. We found that social workers did not always understand why children become carers or how best to support them, while policy makers attributed the prevalence of child carers simply to gender and to traditional social norms that identify girls as mothers-in-the-making: asked why children take on care work, one answer we consistently received was 'tradition' (rather than, say, poverty). This stems in part from gendered and judgemental perceptions of poor parents. Overall, policymakers' views tended to echo deeply entrenched and unhelpful prejudices about poor parents: that they do not value education and do not invest in their children's wellbeing out of a lack of love or regard for them. These attitudes will need to change to ones of support and respect, if much needed replenishment strategies are to be adopted and be successful in supporting child carers and their families and enabling them to live the fulfilling lives they are entitled to.

Overall, our research has pointed to the need for further research both on the life worlds of child carers themselves and on the shortcomings of social policy itself in relation to caregiving by children. We stress that our findings stem from a pilot project; much more extensive, comparative work in this area is urgently required. Nevertheless, even this small study has allowed us to underline the importance of recognition of social reproductive work by children, the depletion that they experience and the imperative of

state action to mitigate the harm done to them. Their unpaid labour is central to the survival of their families and should form a core aspect of debates about poverty, austerity, education, welfare and gendered biases in social policy. Whilst the anxiety that child carers reproduce gendered roles might have some merit, our pilot shows that both boys and girls engage in this work and need support to help their families survive. The idea that children should not participate in this work is misguided, especially where mitigation strategies are stymied because of poverty; rather we would argue that social policy needs to recognise the dilemmas and contradictions that social reproductive work poses and address it in ways that take into account the particular nature of this work, the support that children need – educationally and in terms of their well-being – and the lack of publicly funded good child care that is accessible to all.

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