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Care Work, Poverty and Inequality

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Overview

How Should We Understand Care?

Who needs and provides care?

Poverty and Inequality in Ireland

Interaction between Care and Poverty

Pathways towards an Alternative Vision for Care

What is required?

How Should We Understand Care?

A fundamental pillar of the Common Good.

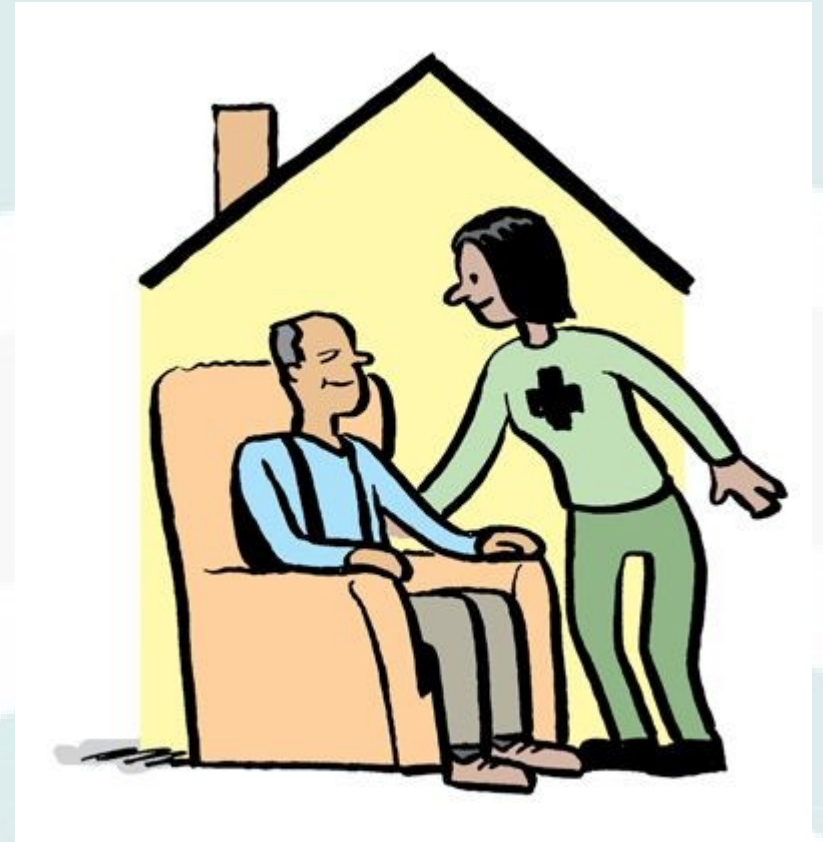
The provision of care encompasses a wide spectrum of activities, ranging from care of self, the nurturing of familial and community relationships through to housing and food systems as well as healthcare and democratic systems.

However, despite its intrinsic importance, the notion of care has often been undervalued and inadequately addressed within policy frameworks.



How Should We Understand Care?

We must re-imagine care as a central tenet of public policy, acknowledging the multifaceted nature of care, encompassing not only healthcare but also support for systems, families, communities, and individuals across their lifespan.



How Should We Understand Care?

By changing our societal relationship to care, we can reaffirm a

“care-centric narrative,”

and leave behind a

“world in which carelessness reigns.”



How Should We Understand Care?

Unpaid care includes domestic tasks and meeting care needs of children and adults without any direct financial compensation, usually directly within households or wider communities.

Paid care refers to work performed in exchange for a wage or salary, typically within the care sector.



Who needs and provides care?

In Ireland, traditionally and continuing into the present, family members play a central role in providing the vast majority of both childcare and eldercare.

5.8 per cent of the population provide regular unpaid care.

This figure equates to 299,128 people, an increase of over 50 per cent from the 195,263 people identified in Census 2016.

The dominant caring role played by women was highlighted by the fact that 181,592 (61 per cent) of these care providers were female.



Who needs and provides care?

This deep reliance on unpaid and informal care provided by families reflects the gaps in the formal care infrastructure, meaning care responsibilities can limit workforce participation, especially for women.

Women disproportionately shoulder the responsibility for both paid and unpaid care work. Globally and in Ireland, women provide the majority of childcare, eldercare, and domestic work within households, often without financial compensation.



Who needs and provides care?

Meanwhile, in the paid care sector, nursing, childcare services, and home health assistance, women also dominate the workforce.

While these roles are socially vital, they are frequently low paid with limited career progression, and precarious working conditions.

This undervaluing reflects deep-rooted gender norms that frame care as a “natural” female responsibility rather than skilled work deserving of fair wages and labour protections.

Also worthy of note is the crucial role migrant workers play in sustaining Ireland’s care economy, filling essential gaps in both paid childcare and eldercare services.



Poverty and Inequality in Ireland

Poverty does not occur in isolation and intersects with inequality.

A report from Oxfam in 2023 found that the top 1 per cent of wealth-holders owns more than a quarter of the country's total wealth, at €232 billion.

A report from the Central Bank of Ireland shows that the wealthiest 10 per cent of Irish households hold almost half the net wealth in the country (48.6 per cent).

Analysis from M. Collins & C. Kavanagh demonstrates that income inequality has remained stubbornly stable over the past fifty years. While the total value of income has increased, not much has changed about its distribution. The share of total household disposable income going to the top 20 percent of households between 1973 and 2022 has steadily remained between 40 and 45 per cent. The share going to the bottom 20 per cent of households has remained around 5 per cent.



Understanding poverty

Where is the poverty line? How many people are poor? On what basis are they classified as poor?

The European Commission and the United Nations (UN), among others, use a poverty line located at 60 per cent of median income.

Consequently, the income poverty lines for a single adult derived from this are:

50 per cent of median is €287.43 a week

60 per cent of median is €344.91 a week

70 per cent of median is €402.40 a week



Understanding poverty

Updating the 60 per cent median income poverty line to 2025 levels, using published CSO data on the growth in average hourly earnings in 2024 (+6.2 per cent), produces a value for the relative income poverty line at the start of that year.

In 2025 that figure is €366.30 for a single person. Any adult below this weekly income level will be counted as being at risk of poverty.



Understanding poverty

The 2024 Survey on Income and Living Conditions (SILC) reported that 11.7 per cent of the population were at risk of poverty, an increase from 10.6 per cent in 2023.

To fully grasp the scale of Ireland's poverty problem, it is useful to translate these poverty percentages into numbers of people.

630,000 people lived below the 60 per cent of median income poverty line in 2024.

Looking over the past 30 years, despite a reduction in the headline poverty rate (from 15.6 to 11.7 per cent) there are almost 70,000 more people in poverty (as the population has increased).



Interaction between Care and Poverty

In Ireland, we consign large numbers of people who are unavailable for work to poverty.

At the same time, we require large numbers of people to forego work to fulfil caring roles.

We fail to adequately support people doing that caring work.



Interaction between Care and Poverty

The 2024 Survey on Income and Living Conditions survey, conducted by the Central Statistics Office notes that those most at risk of poverty report their Principal Economic Status (PES) as either unemployed (34.1 per cent) or by those who are unable to work due to long-standing health problems (32.5 per cent).

This compares with the at risk of poverty rate of just 5.4 per cent for those who report that they are employed.



Interaction between Care and Poverty

In Ireland, limited availability and high costs for any externally sourced formal care puts it out of reach for many lower income families and exacerbates the challenge of juggling care responsibilities with paid employment.

Paid care work is essential to modern functioning society, yet it is often linked to low pay, precarious conditions, and in work poverty.



Interaction between Care and Poverty

In Ireland and elsewhere, the outsourcing of care has led to a greater reliance on private childcare facilities, nursing homes, and agency-based homecare services. While it could be argued that this can increase choice and flexibility, it can introduce market pressures that prioritise cost-efficiency and a profit motive over quality.



Pathways towards an Alternative Vision for Care

A key aspect of the social contract is solidarity between generations.

At different points in the life-cycle, all of us will be either net beneficiaries from, or net contributors to society, and recipients or providers of care.



Pathways towards an Alternative Vision for Care

A new approach that values care requires measures to foster the social conditions in which care is supported.

98, 117 people are in receipt of carers allowance.

In the context of addressing poverty among carers and those in receipt of care, it is essential that our social protection system provide an adequate income to live life with dignity, so that those whose participation in the labour force is limited due to caring responsibilities are not left behind.



Pathways towards an Alternative Vision for Care

Many of the groups in Irish society that experienced increases in poverty levels over the last decade have been dependent on social welfare payments: these include the unemployed, the retired, lone parents and those who are ill or have a disability.

Yet we know that adequate social welfare rates make all the difference.



What is required?

Revising the classification of rural areas and rural typologies would make for more informed policy development.

Provide a universal basic income for unpaid carers.

Affordable, accessible care services, flexible workplace policies, and cultural change.

Subsidised, high-quality childcare is required.

Improving wages, guaranteeing stable contracts, and investing in training are essential to recognise care as skilled, socially vital work and to ensure both workers and those they care for can thrive.



What is required?

Benchmark core social welfare rates to 27.5 per cent of average earnings to protect vulnerable households.

Increase investment in early childhood education and care and after-school care by 0.1 per cent of GNI* each year with a view to reaching 1 per cent of GNI* by 2030.

Ensure the provision of multiannual funding for the sector.

Give serious consideration to policies such as a universal basic income and universal basic services.

Set a new tax-take target on a per capita basis and gradually increase the total tax-take to reach this target.

