


COMMENT

## Full-Rights Feminists and a History of the Care Crisis

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### Abstract

In 2018, the International Labour Organization published a study about the critical role of paid and unpaid care work for the health of society, the economy, and the planet and about the ways that care work is sustained through the super-exploitation of women, particularly migrant women and racially and ethnically marginalized women. Dorothy Sue Cobble's sweeping, carefully researched, and beautifully written study of full-rights feminists gives us a much-needed history of how the ILO came to attend to questions of care work and social reproduction and how hard-fought this recognition has been.

In 2018, the International Labour Organization published a doorstopper of a study – complete with graphs and charts and a lengthy bibliography – about the critical role of paid and unpaid care work for the health of society, the economy, and the planet, and about the ways that care work is sustained through the super-exploitation of women, particularly migrant women and racially and ethnically marginalized women.<sup>1</sup> Dorothy Sue Cobble's sweeping, carefully researched, and beautifully written study of full-rights feminists gives us a much-needed history of how the ILO came to attend to questions of care work and social reproduction and how hard-fought this recognition has been. Cobble's prosopographical approach allows her to follow a tenacious collection of activists and advocates – from Japan's Tanaka Taka at the 1919 International Labor Convention (ILC) debates over nightwork to Ai-Jen Poo and pressing for domestic workers' rights at the 2011 ILC, drawing lessons from her successful campaign in New York.

In between, we follow a cast of what Cobble dubs “full rights feminists”, who have fought doggedly for over a century now for the recognition of a complete package of social, political, economic, and civil rights. Nodding to the inevitable shortcomings of

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<sup>1</sup>Laura Addati *et al.*, *Care Work and Care Jobs for the Future of Decent Work*, International Labour Office (Geneva, 2018). For a history of the ILO's attention to care labor, see Eileen Boris, *Making the Woman Worker: Precarious Labor and the Fight for Global Standards, 1919–2019* (New York, 2019).

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such labels, she explains that they “shared a desire for a more egalitarian, democratic world, and they fashioned institutions, laws, and social policies in the United States and abroad to realize those aspirations” (p. 2). That is to say, these women recognized that access to more narrowly defined rights to education, credit, or a political voice were worth little when they were not combined with the recognition of their indispensable role in caretaking and social reproduction. These are not the burn-it-down feminists of radical separatism, nor the ambivalent feminists of revolutionary movements. The full-rights feminists shared a faith in power of institutions to define and uphold these rights and an abiding belief that women’s participation in the waged labor force demanded a thoroughgoing reconsideration of what constituted fundamental labor rights.

It would be impossible to capture here the breadth and depth of this book’s contribution to our understanding of this long struggle to imbricate civil and political rights with social and economic rights. Cobble takes readers on a captivating exploration of the ways that specific contexts shaped debates about protectionism (e.g. regarding issues such as maternity and nightwork) versus equal opportunity. This deeply historical approach allows Cobble to avoid falling into anachronistic characterizations of these actors’ demands as wrong-headed or insufficiently feminist, instead allowing readers to see how interventions articulated with the prevailing terms of policy debates. Along the way, she includes nuggets that help readers understand that these efforts took place within a larger tangle of political struggles that not only defined the stakes of these debates but also described the range of possibilities. Cobble reminds us, for example, that Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins fought to keep the Immigration and Naturalization Service in the Department of Labor rather than the Justice Department because immigration was a humanitarian rather than criminal concern (p. 171). She gestures to the fact that some of the most effective advocates – women such as Frieda Miller and Pauli Murray – eschewed contemporary gender conventions. (Miller lived openly with her partner Pauline Newman, and Murray identified as what might now be termed transgender or nonbinary.) These apparent asides remind readers that conversations about what constituted a female subject or a national interest were embedded in all manner of decisions about what these concepts meant for people’s everyday lives.

For the sake of this review dossier, I want to focus on two contributions that I found particularly valuable: Cobble’s attention to paid and unpaid labors of social reproduction (the care work central to the 2018 ILO report above), and her demonstration of the deeply transnational nature of these conversations. Neither of these contributions is entirely novel – Cobble joins robust bodies of literature in both cases – but the weaving of them together and consistently through this sustained study of the struggle for labor rights sets in relief how critical both these elements were (and remain) to this ongoing policy debate. By giving these two considerations a central place in her narrative, Cobble transforms the ways we understand the dynamics at play throughout this history

It is, of course, rather depressing to be reminded that the issues at stake in current debates about “human infrastructure” in the United States have been in play for over a century now, and the needle has barely budged. At the 1919 ILC, labor women lobbied unsuccessfully for an “expansive vision” that included “state benefits for mothers

as a social right and put women in charge of decisions about their bodies. All work, including reproductive labor, they argued, deserved society's respect and financial support" (p. 71). Progressive reformer Mary van Kleef pressed for a Women's Charter grounded in a political economy of abundance rather than scarcity (p. 215). New Dealer Frieda Miller waged a decades-long effort to insist that "women's full citizenship – civil, industrial, and social – required rethinking how household labor was organized" (p. 242). US labor advocate Esther Peterson anticipated what would become fundamental principles of feminist care ethics: deep interrelationality and interdependence. Highlighting the importance of "mutual assistance" over market principles in her 1961 address to the ILO assembly, she stressed, "The old 'giver' concept of technical assistance is gone. We all are receivers and we all have much to learn from others" (p. 358). By the mid-1960s, labor feminists at the ILO had successfully characterized the uneven distribution of family responsibilities as a form of sex discrimination and passed a resolution regarding the sexual division of labor within the home (p. 363).

*For the Many: American Feminists and the Global Fight for Democratic Equality* (hereafter *For the Many*) joins an exciting historiographical revival of transnational women's history with a particular attention to deepening our understanding of the ways that feminist ideas traveled – often carried by women who only ambivalently identified as feminist, if at all.<sup>2</sup> In particular, there is growing attention to the critical role that women in socialist countries played in building networks that included women from the Global South.<sup>3</sup> Tellingly, the full-rights feminists who pointed to the need to recognize and value the labors of social reproduction often drew on their experiences outside the United States, which offered new perspectives on the range of possibilities for how to organize and support these efforts. Feminists from Alice Paul to Pauli Murray insisted on the importance of seeing their campaigns as part of an international struggle, although they adopted sharply divergent approaches to improving women's status (pp. 146, 219, 386). As Cobble notes, the 1938 Lima Declaration of Women's Rights "reflected the long-standing commitment of Latin American feminists to the blending of women's civil and political rights with their social rights as mothers" (p. 216). By the mid-1950s, the Chilean activist and educator Ana Figueroa had risen to the leadership ranks of the ILO and advocated for including women's family responsibilities among the agency's concerns (p. 325). Esther Peterson and Frieda Miller learned from their observations abroad about publicly funded "home aide" programs that provided in-home services to alleviate

<sup>2</sup>Recent contributions include Keisha N. Blain, *Set the World on Fire: Black Nationalist Women and the Global Struggle for Freedom* (Philadelphia, PA, 2018); Katherine M. Marino, *Feminism for the Americas: The Making of an International Human Rights Movement*, Gender and American Culture series (Chapel Hill, NC, 2019); Joanne Meyerowitz, *A War on Global Poverty: The Lost Promise of Redistribution and the Rise of Microcredit* (Princeton, NJ, 2021); Jocelyn Olcott, *International Women's Year: The Greatest Consciousness-Raising Event in History* (New York, 2017); Judy Tzu-Chun Wu, *Radicals on the Road: Internationalism, Orientalism, and Feminism during the Vietnam Era* (Ithaca, NY, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>See, for example, Michelle Chase, "'Hands Off Korea!': Women's Internationalist Solidarity and Peace Activism in Early Cold War Cuba", *Journal of Women's History*, 32:3 (2020); Francisca de Haan, "The Global Left-Feminist 1960s: From Copenhagen to Moscow and New York", in *The Routledge Handbook of the Global Sixties* (New York, 2018); Kristen Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex: Socialist Women's Activism and Global Solidarity during the Cold War* (Durham, NC, 2018).

domestic labor burdens (pp. 290, 345).<sup>4</sup> Peterson's 1963 report *American Women* – published, Cobble notes, the same year as Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* and selling sixty-four thousand copies its first year – drew particularly on her experience living in Sweden and Belgium to make a case for a package of policies that remains out of reach in the United States: paid maternity leave; universal childcare; social security benefits for homemakers; and the “security of basic income” (p. 344). Through the leadership of women such as Miller and Peterson, President Kennedy's Presidential Commission on the Status of Women called for “massive investment in childcare and early childhood education”, pointing to Latin America and Scandinavia as “models to emulate” (p. 347).

Cobble reveals US women's persistent frustration at policymakers' unwillingness to adopt some of the most promising approaches to alleviating women's social-reproduction labor burdens. The United States government's refusal to ratify most ILO conventions left US women at the mercy of employers to provide maternity support – a system that made even less sense than employer-based health insurance (p. 313).<sup>5</sup> For Frieda Miller, the more she traveled throughout the world as part of her work for the ILO, the more keenly aware she became of US parochialism (p. 353). In the end, market solutions prevailed over social-welfare solutions in the United States, and US labor activists focused on improving conditions for paid domestic employees. “For Frieda Miller”, Cobble writes, “equality for women was impossible without valuing household labor, paid and unpaid” (p. 309). Miller collaborated with the prominent civil rights activist Dorothy Height to build what would grow into a grassroots movement for domestic workers' rights (pp. 352–353). In 1974, US Congresswomen Shirley Chisolm and Patsy Takemoto Mink succeeded in extending the Fair Labor Standards Act to domestic workers. If policymakers refused to look to Latin America and Scandinavia as “models to emulate”, activists and legislators at least hoped to achieve more humane conditions for paid careworkers, who were overwhelmingly women of color.

Cobble stops short of offering a clear answer to the question that has animated the field of care studies in the United States: why, in a country whose political rhetoric is dripping with the discourse of family values and which produced some of the world's most dynamic, militant feminist activism generation after generation, has policy-making continued to ignore the time, effort, and expertise of social reproduction? Why, with women such as Frances Perkins and Frieda Miller on the watch, was all this labor excluded from the principal economic metric of Gross Domestic Product and repeatedly omitted from the System of National Accounts? Cobble amply demonstrates that there were plenty of informed, capable advocates who were not shy about pointing out the looming catastrophe that, by the 1990s, would be called

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<sup>4</sup>Such approaches would not have been entirely novel to the likes of Miller and Peterson. As Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein demonstrate: “For most of the nation's history, the household served as the locus of care.” The New Deal fostered the Visiting Housekeeping Program, and Ellen Winston, who would serve as President Kennedy's Commissioner of Welfare, drew on her experience implementing the Homemaker Service in North Carolina. Eileen Boris and Jennifer Klein, *Caring for America: Home Health Workers in the Shadow of the Welfare State* (New York, 2012), pp. 20, 75–76, as well as Chapters 1–3 for home aides.

<sup>5</sup>On US failure to ratify international conventions, particularly as pertaining to women's rights, see Lisa Baldez, *Defying Convention: US Resistance to the UN Treaty on Women's Rights* (Cambridge, 2014).

a “crisis of care”.<sup>6</sup> A century before a global pandemic demonstrated how deep the crisis could become, full-rights feminists were sounding the alarm at the ILO. Cobble has laid a sturdy foundation upon which other researchers might build, and she has offered a thoroughgoing study of ways that policymakers and activists elsewhere have addressed this issue. Such studies might take a deeper dive into the effects of Cuba’s 1975 Family Code, which mandated equal responsibility for child-rearing and domestic labor as well as equal opportunities for education and employment or the efforts by Soviet-bloc countries and members of the Women’s International Democratic Federation to promote state-sponsored childcare.<sup>7</sup>

Biography and prosopography have become mainstays of women’s history in the United States, not least because there are now several wonderful archives that particularly collect in this area and that catalog collections as personal papers. These sources have allowed historians to move considerably beyond the great-men and institutional histories that track more easily in official archives. They do, however, have the methodological pitfall of amplifying the voices of those who are already audible in extant histories. Most of the women who appear in Cobble’s account are among the boldface names of women’s history – not only figures such as Frieda Miller and Dorothy Height, but also Devaki Jain and Ela Bhatt, Gloria Steinem and Ai-jen Poo. These are women who still merit more attention than they currently receive in most US history textbooks, but they have memoirs and Wikipedia entries and are visible in the historical record. Researchers looking to build upon Cobble’s considerable contribution may want to search for or even create (e.g. with oral histories, interviews, and surveys) sources that offer some perspectives of the women these full-rights feminists set out to support.

*For the Many* does not offer a tidy, progressive narrative of feminist solidarity, but rather a rich exploration of the ongoing debates among deeply committed feminists about how best to advocate so that all women might achieve the fullest expression of their rights. Drawing on an enormous archive of personal accounts and correspondence, news reports, and published materials from around the world and in various languages, Cobble allows readers to follow actors into the room as they argue over principles, strategies, and tactics. While Swedes such as Sigrid Ekendahl promoted equality-centered policies that would encourage men to perform more care labor and require employers to pay equal wages, for example, her dear friend Esther Peterson advocated better part-time positions and a recognition that women would likely always bear the greater burden of social reproduction. Cobble also follows these actors out of the room as political struggles and the immense demands on their time and energies strained friendships and family ties. As ambitious and comprehensive as it is, *For the Many* points researchers to many stories left to be told; it will no doubt remain a touchstone for the history of feminism and labor for years to come.

<sup>6</sup>Julia T. Wood, *Who cares?: Women, Care, and Culture* (Carbondale, CO, 1994). See also Lourdes Benería, “The Crisis of Care, International Migration, and Public Policy”, *Feminist Economics*, 14:3 (2008); Nancy Fraser, “Capitalism’s Crisis of Care”, *Dissent*, 63:4 (2016).

<sup>7</sup>Ana María Álvarez-Tabío Albo, “General Overview of Cuban Family Law Legislation”, *Florida Journal of International Law*, 29:1 (2017); Ghodsee, *Second World, Second Sex*.