

Title

Caring Together: The Politics and Practices of Care Work in Community-Oriented Housing Arrangements

Abstract

The inequality of social reproductive labour remains a central issue in contemporary feminist discourse, highlighting persistent gender inequalities and structural challenges in capitalist societies. While existing research has largely focused on the role of welfare states and policy interventions, this paper explores alternative care arrangements within community-oriented housing models in Vienna. By employing a qualitative research approach, this study examines the challenges and opportunities in the distribution of care work in cooperative housing, co-living, and social housing projects.

Through semi-structured interviews with residents of community-oriented housing, the study captures lived experiences and collective practices of care, addressing themes such as fairness, chances, and mental load. The findings indicate that these housing arrangements offer potential pathways for a more equitable distribution of care work, challenging traditional gender roles and fostering communal responsibility. By analysing the interplay between social reproduction and communal living, this paper underscores the transformative potential of community-oriented housing in addressing systemic inequalities in care work distribution.

Theoretical framework

In line with feminist scholars like Silvia Federici and others this paper aims to make the private political again. In doing so, the concept of social reproduction is used to show the labour of maintaining and sustaining life (Bhattacharya, 2017; Federici, 2020) and present this as the backbones of capitalist growth and economic wellness. This research aligns with a critical tradition of scholarship rooted in Marxist thought, which interrogates the socio-economic structures of capitalist societies. Drawing on this theoretical framework, community-oriented housing arrangements like cooperative housing, co-living, and social housing projects are examined as practical alternatives to the individualism and commodification inherent in capitalist modes of living.

Social reproduction has been a key concern in feminist research for decades. Scholars such as Nancy Fraser, Silvia Federici, and Tithi Bhattacharya have critically illuminated the multifaceted role of social reproduction in capitalist societies, particularly its gendered dimensions and the ways it shapes and is shaped by the lives of women*. There is a myriad of definitions of the term but I find Bhattacharya's understanding of social reproduction as "life making" instead of the capitalist "profit making" very intuitively understandable (Bhattacharya, 2017).

In response to the crisis of care, Emma Dowling highlights the connection between care and democracy. She explains that capitalism's so-called "care fix" merely commodifies care, making it profitable without actually alleviating the crisis. Instead, care is outsourced, while underlying issues such as gendered and racialized inequalities remain unaddressed. Consequently, Dowling critiques these supposed solutions and advocates for an alternative approach. She emphasizes the need to consider care within the broader organization of society and as a fundamental component of a "more radical transformation". (Dowling, 2018, p. 339)

Contribution

This research therefore aims to contribute on multiple levels. Theoretically, it bridges feminist care ethics and critiques of neoliberalism to develop a nuanced understanding of care work as a socio-political and economic phenomenon. Societally, it highlights the potential of community-oriented housing to address systemic challenges in care work distribution, offering alternative frameworks that move beyond traditional familial or institutional models.

In order to explore the mentioned topics, the research question leading through this paper is: *What challenges and opportunities arise in the distribution of care work within community-oriented housing arrangements in Vienna?* By addressing this question, the study contributes to ongoing debates on the intersections of care, housing, and social reproduction, shedding light on both the possibilities and limitations of alternative care arrangements in contemporary urban contexts. The approach to this will be by qualitative research using semi-structured interviews with a sample of people living in different community-oriented housing in Vienna, thereby gaining important insights into the realities of organizing and dividing care tasks in these specific cases.

References

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