

Care work, 'caretariat' and mobilisations as practices of 'caretizenship': Sociological considerations from the Portuguese case of an informal carers' movement

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Abstract

This article analyses the informal carers' movement in Portugal as a case study to rethink work, care, and political subjectivity. First, it examines how the debate on care challenges androcentric conceptions of work. Second, it revisits the notion of a new care-based social subject, reflecting on the political agency emerging from caregiving experiences. Third, it examines the movement's repertoires of action, highlighting traits of self-organised mobilisation. Fourth, it analyses the role of the state, torn between familialist paradigms and public responses, and the political paradoxes posed by the recognition of unpaid care. The article proposes an expanded sociology of work that includes social reproduction and care as central terrains. It aims to demonstrate that recognizing unpaid care expands our imagination of the working class and the emancipation of labour. It stresses how care practices hold transformative political potential and can reshape understandings of citizenship, political contestation and collective action.

Keywords

Care work, labour, 'caretariat', informal care, social movement

Introduction

May 1st is Workers' Day. It's also Informal Carers' Day. The Informal Carer is conveyed to civil society as a worker imbued with kindness and adoration for their neighbour. A kind soul who CHOOSES to give up their life in favour of others.

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The Informal Carer loves, often unconditionally... most times unconditionally... Almost always unconditionally.

BUT... The informal carer is a full-time worker who saves the state millions every year.

A worker who doesn't overburden the National Health Service with their care; a worker who, for lack of options, financial, physical and other means, takes on the burden of looking after another human being, putting his physical and mental health at risk. Losing its livelihood; without days off, weekends, holidays, rest, wages, social life and so many other civic achievements that society considers to be the minimum for maintaining human decency.

(...)

We are a labour force of around 800,000 workers. We want to be heard.

STATUTE FOR INFORMAL CARERS NOW!

In National Association of Informal Carers (ANCI) Facebook page, 1/05/2024.

On 1 May 2024, for the first time, the Workers' Day trade union parade in the Portuguese capital, which every year brings together tens of thousands of people at the call of the General Confederation of Portuguese Workers, had a bloc made up of unpaid informal carers. The call for participation in the demonstration, issued by the National Association of Informal Carers, read: 'Because all Informal Carers are also workers..... without pay, without union representation, without rights....'

Participation in this parade did not come out of the blue. The process of setting up a movement of informal carers had its embryo in the end of 2015 when three unpaid informal carers began communicating via social media. Sofia Figueiredo, one of the driving forces behind the movement, who would go on to become the first president of the National Association of Informal Carers (ANCI), explains the origin of the process: 'We felt frustrated and indignant at the lack of training and information provided. We considered it a profound injustice that carers were left to fend for themselves, without being recognised as having a contributory career, employment rights or psychosocial support' (cf Soeiro et al., 2020). Over the following months, these carers joined others and decided to move from social media to face-to-face meetings, proposing to organise a national meeting.

The first 'National Meeting of Carers of People with Alzheimer's and other Dementias' occurred in June 2016. The informal carers who participated in the event did not know each other apart from the virtual space. It was Facebook groups that, a few years earlier, had created the first spaces for sociability, based essentially on the exchange of information and 'tips' on how to deal with pathologies, on venting about tiredness and difficulties and on a dynamic close to self-help groups. These groups involuntarily forged the embryo of a 'collective conscience' that would take shape, from 2016 onwards, in a movement of carers that put the issue of unpaid informal care on the political and media agenda and managed to get the approval, in 2019, of an Informal Carer Statute that legally recognised this type of work for the first time in Portugal.

The movement of informal carers has unveiled a reality with considerable numerical strength that has been consigned to a kind of 'legal underground' (Soeiro and Araújo, 2020). According to figures provided at that time by Eurocarers (Goodwin, 2017), the number of informal carers in Portugal corresponded to around 8% of the total Portuguese population, which meant an absolute figure of around 800,000 unpaid carers, from which a quarter were 'full-time' carers (around 200,000 people). It was estimated that 80% of care in Portugal is provided by unpaid non-professionals, the majority of whom are women (EC, 2018).

The collective action of informal carers has removed this work from invisibility, denaturalising the representation of care as a 'selfless', 'kind' practice done 'by choice' and drawing attention to its

exploitative and coercive dimensions (Williams, 2018). In this way, the movement unveiled the ‘hidden abode of unwaged carework’ (Fraser, 2022: 118), contributing to reconfiguring representations of care and making it seen as precarious work, unpaid, unrecognised, without social protection and lacking public support. Without neglecting the affective and emotional component associated with the ‘ethics’ of care, informal carers made visible the reality of expropriation, claiming to operate in a kind of semi-forced replacement of the state, given the scarcity of public responses for dependent people.

In other writings, we have had the opportunity to describe the genesis of this movement in detail (Soeiro et al., 2020; Soeiro and Araújo, 2020), to problematise its demands and the ambivalent and limited legal recognition obtained with the Statute of the Informal Carer (Araújo and Soeiro, 2021), and to try to insert the debate on public policies to support unpaid informal carers into the framework of the care regime in Portugal (Soeiro, 2022, 2023). In this text, we start with the case study of the carers’ movement to reflect on how the debate around care forces us to de-androcentring work to rethink its emancipation. Secondly, we discuss the concept of ‘caretariat’ (Durán, 2013) in the light of the movement’s experience. Thirdly, we briefly describe and analyse the movement of informal carers in Portugal and their repertoires of action, problematising the practices of mobilisation and organisation as practices of ‘caretizenship’¹ (Casas-Cortés, 2019; Junco et al., 2004) that have a connection with the bottom-up, prefigurative and self-organization traits of ‘Do-It-Yourself’ (DIY) movements that take action outside formal institutions or state systems. Fourthly, we discuss the ambivalence of the state’s recognition of this work, the tension between familialism and de-familiarisation, and the challenges this reality poses for public policy. Fifthly, we propose some guidelines for a sociological approach to this issue. In conclusion, we attempt to revisit some transversal ideas learned from this case in order to develop a critical perspective on informal care and inequality and reevaluate the political potential of care practices.

Methodological note

This article is based on a case study (Yin, 2014) of the informal carers’ movement in Portugal. The research began with an investigation of the period between 2016 and 2020, combining participant observation of public initiatives organised by the promoters of the petition for the creation of the Informal Carer Statute and, later, by the National Association of Informal Carers (ANCI). These events were analysed according to their repertoires of action, number of participants, alliances formed, and media impact. The study also included the collection of press coverage from June 2016 to July 2019; the analysis of 21 speeches and testimonies presented during the parliamentary debate on ‘Measures to support informal carers’ (held in February 2018); and documentary analysis of political materials such as press releases, law proposals, bills, and social media content. Additionally, an online ethnography (Baker, 2013) of ANCI’s Facebook page was conducted. Several of these materials have led to other publications, as this research process has resulted in prior publications (Araújo and Soeiro, 2021; Soeiro and Araújo, 2020; Soeiro et al., 2020; Soeiro, 2023).

This research has been extended over time. For the present article, we updated the analysis to include ANCI’s Facebook activity from the past two years, the demonstrations called by the movement in 2024 (on 25 April and 1 May), and a new petition launched in January 2025 and formally delivered to the Assembly of the Republic in June 2025.

In line with Burawoy’s (1998) view of the ‘extended case method’, it is understood that qualitative research integrates theory, empirical observation and the researcher’s intersubjective experience, seeking to frame the case of the informal carers’ movement within broader theoretical discussions, situating it within the debates of the sociology of work and its boundaries, social reproduction theory, materialist feminism and critical theory, and suggesting the extent to which the case in question can contribute to some theoretical reconstruction in these fields.

De-androcentring work: Care and the emancipation of work beyond employment

In order to understand and study the mobilisations and practices of care, we need to be suspicious of and destabilise the established boundaries, definitions and dominant representations of work. Far from being universal, the concept of work used in public discourse but also commonly in the social sciences is androcentric, tending to make feminised and unpaid work invisible. Doing so contributes to limiting our ability to grasp the territories of care work expropriation, to think about the modalities of labour mobilisation in the field of reproductive work, and to consider the challenges of work emancipation in a broad sense. Sociology of the mobilisation of caregivers and care practices has as an epistemological precondition the reformulation of the concept of work, widening it.

Attention to reproductive work and the critique of androcentric conceptions of work had an inaugural moment in the debate on domestic work, which developed in the 60s and 70s of the 20th century (Benston, 1969; Dalla Costa and James, 1972), with intense disputes in feminist theory about the value of this work, how to measure it and who appropriates it. Since that time, socialist and materialist feminisms have unveiled the forms of unpaid work on which the reproduction of society and the accumulation of capital depend, tried to measure this volume of unpaid work (Gardiner, 1975), denaturalised and denounced its coercive nature and tried to interpret the role of domestic work in the reproduction of capital. The aim was to show, from a critique of the narrow economic and sociological conceptions of labour, including in some Marxist approaches, that the ‘most precious product on the capitalist market’, which is ‘labour power’, is produced for free by women (Federici and Cox, 2019 [1975]: 68).

With different approaches, feminist economics has since challenged two reductionisms: the one that associates work with wage relations or paid labour, and the one that associates economics only with the market sphere. Against these, three propositions have been asserted: that the economy concerns all the processes that sustain life, whether they are monetised or not; that understanding gender relations is essential to understanding how the economic system works; and that it is necessary to overcome the monetarist and patriarchal prejudices that make unpaid work invisible and that establish the gender hierarchies on which the sexual division of labour is based (Orozco, 2014). These reflections were echoed in the call of the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, which urged governments to make an effort to account for unpaid work by incorporating it into national accounts.

More recently, have been presented proposals for a ‘purple economy’, an alternative to the dominant paradigms in macroeconomics with a simultaneous emphasis on ‘care’ and ‘gender equality’, aimed to serve as a strategy for the generation of ‘purple jobs’ and provide a feminist alternative to austerity (Ilkkanacan, 2013, 2016); and for an ‘economy of care’, committed to overcoming entrenched dichotomies (work/leisure, work/life, public/private), to challenging the ‘false idea of the autonomy of the economic system’ and to bringing the body into the economy, against the disembodied science of ‘homo economicus’ (Carrasco, 2014; Orozco, 2014: 71). Articulating feminism and a critical Marxist perspective, Nancy Fraser insists, in her last book, that capitalism is maintained by noneconomic social spheres that underpin and enable economic production (Fraser, 2022: 24). To cast unwaged care work, essential to the existence of the human subjects, is part of the major epistemic shift ‘from the front story of exploitation to the back-story of expropriation’ (Fraser, 2022: 8).

On the other hand, the debate on the boundaries of labour has also been carried out about the study of the reconfiguration of the economy, with the recent emergence of digital platforms (namely Google; Apple; Facebook; Amazon; and Microsoft), the reality of ‘playbour’ (Kücklich, 2005) – where modder’s leisure (*play*) is commodified by the games industry (to which it is non-paid *labour*) – or the plataformization of cultural production with non-existent salaries, where ‘DIY values come to be used by the capitalist

economy' (Bennet and Guerra, 2023: 5), expanding forms of labour that correspond to a 'wageless life' (Denning, 2010).²

The term care, in turn, emerged more intensely in the social sciences from the 1980s onwards. It was initially associated with studies on the 'ethics of care', understood as a way of socialising and interpreting moral dilemmas based not on mere abstract principles but on particular, relational, and contextual judgments (Gilligan, 1982; Tronto, 1993). In the field of labour sociology, attention to care has arisen, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world, from the attempt to identify the differentiating elements of women's invisible work, specifically the emotional and affective dimensions of relational and interpersonal work (Hochschild, 1983) and also in the context of the debate on 'global care chains', which structure labour migrations from the countries of the global South to care professions in response to the 'care crisis' in the global North (Hochschild, 2000). In the French-speaking context, the study of care is indebted to research that sought to reflect on the relationship between social devaluation, lack of recognition and the 'sexual division of labour' (Kergoat, 1978), to the proposals to broaden the concept of work to include the entire 'production of living' (Hirata and Zarifian, 2000), to the theories on the consubstantiality of social relations of sex, gender and race (Kergoat, 2016), and with expression throughout the lineage of the so-called 'French school of care' (Molinier, 2013).

The centrality of care to the existence of our common life has been increasingly recognised. A critical 2018 International Labour Organisation report on this topic pointed out that every day 16.4 billion hours of unpaid care work are carried out worldwide, three-quarters of which are provided by women, many of whom live in poverty (ILO 2018: 1–4). The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the issues of care and 'essential workers' to the centre of public debate but revealed a major contradiction: many of the activities on which we depend are the least recognised, the most undervalued, the lowest paid (Graeber, 2020) and sometimes their workers are even deprived of citizenship (the case of migrants), or simply do expropriated work without any pay or compensation, as informal carers (Guimarães and Hirata, 2020; Soeiro, 2022). Trying to grasp the broad and paradoxical role of informal care in contemporary societies, and the multiple inequalities that run through it, Peterie and Broom (2024) identify five key literatures that understand informal care: as a vital yet unevenly distributed resource that sustains financialized economies, as an affective relation unevenly distributed in or societies, as an activity dependent on shrinking public infrastructures, as a spatial practice shaped by physical environments and as a relation that extends beyond human relationships to include ecological interdependence.

The 'caretariat': A new labour subjectivity?

The act of naming has a constitutive power of social reality and group formation, of moulding shared representations of the world and is the object of symbolic struggles for the classification of reality (Bourdieu, 1987; 2021). Naming is a social operation, both epistemological and political. Without words to name a particular phenomenon, or a collective, it cannot be perceived autonomously. The emergence of the 'informal carer' category, a concept crossed by different and contradictory political, social and scientific uses (Cruz et al., 2023), should be analysed in this context. In Portugal, the term was essential to the collective awareness and political subjectivation that gave rise to the informal carers' movement, which was particularly active between 2016 and 2019, and continues its intervention to this day. The concept of 'informal carer' should be seen as an *emic* term, appropriated by people who, by caring informally for children and young people with disabilities, the elderly or people with dementia, have come to self-identify and claim recognition for this activity and conceive of themselves as agents of change (Soeiro and Araújo, 2020).

Maria de los Ángeles Durán (2013) goes further and suggests adopting a neologism - the 'caretariat' - to name 'a new social class emerging in developed countries' as a result of ageing and also the development of

welfare states, with an essential economic function but practically no rights (Durán, 2020). In her opinion, carers have ‘all the conditions that a social class theoretically needs in order to become a revolutionary social agent, except the awareness of being one’ (Durán, 2020: 4). The aim of her proposal is, therefore, to ‘end the consideration of carers as a dispersed conglomerate of individuals who care’, favouring, through a name with which they could identify themselves as a class, their conversion into ‘true social agents, aware of their role in the productive structure’ (Durán, 2020: 4).

To construct the concept of ‘caretariat’, Durán (2020) compares this alleged class with the proletariat and the peasantry. Like the proletariat, full-time carers do not own the means of production. But what is more, in the case of unpaid carers, they cannot even integrate into the labour market; they have longer working hours (potentially 24 h a day, 365 days a week, as the Portuguese informal carers said at the demonstrations), and they do not benefit from the rights inherent in formal salaried work (social protection, pension rights). Their lack of time inhibits them from accessing leisure, culture, sexuality or political participation. Still according to Durán (2020), there are other differences with the proletariat: the ‘caretariat’ lacks effective weapons of labour struggle, such as strikes, and does not have an obvious antagonist since they cannot ‘antagonise the people who receive their care work’, because this would go ‘against deep-rooted moral principles’ (of the responsibility to care as a family duty). The chance of finding an antagonist would only exist by shifting the responsibility for care onto the state, which is precisely what happened in the movement in Portugal when carers formulated their activity as ‘replacing the state’ and, therefore, ‘saving the state money’, as we read in the publication that is the epigraph to this article.

Unlike the proletariat, whose emergence is associated with a spatial concentration in industrial units, the ‘caretariat’ suffers, like the peasantry, from a spatial dispersion that weakens the processes of meeting and collective recognition. It also has another similarity with the peasantry: the existence of subclasses with ‘sometimes coinciding and sometimes opposing’ interests within it (as was the case with small landowners and rural wage earners). In the case of the ‘caretariat’, Durán argues, the division would be between unpaid informal carers and paid professional carers, with different moral justifications and ideological links to work, which can lead to fragmentation.

Durán’s conceptual proposal is still being refined, as she recognises³ (Batthyány, 2022: 290). For this reason too, its scope remains unclear. For the author, full-time unpaid informal carers would be ‘the conceptual core of care provision, not overlapping with other professional categories’, and would therefore constitute ‘the innovative conceptual reference as an element of distortion and incongruity in developed societies’ (Durán, 2020: 8). However, ‘although they are the sub-group of greatest conceptual interest, their numerical strength is relatively low, they are often of advanced age and have a low capacity to make demands’ (Durán, 2020), which is why the author prefers to incorporate part-time informal carers (i.e., those who combine unpaid care with a formal job in another area) into the concept, as well as ‘the small part of this group that carries out paid care work’, ‘often poorly paid’, ‘in the majority of cases migrants and women’. The defence of the inclusion of care professionals and part-time carers in the ‘caretariat’ stems from the following assessment: ‘if only full-time carers are included in the caretariat, the concept gains in clarity and consistency, but their numerical strength and the weight of their role in the social and political structure are so reduced that they are greatly weakened’ (Durán, 2020: 9).

From our perspective, Durán’s contribution has the merit of drawing attention to a particularly invisibilised part of people who provide care work, and of subjecting informal carers to the same theoretical and political questions that have been asked of social classes, particularly by the Marxist paradigm. In other words, to identify their roles in the economic system, their relationship with the means of production, the mechanisms for creating a collective consciousness and their process of formation as a ‘group for itself’.

We disagree, however, that it is useful to include paid care workers in this concept – paid care workers, which, according to the ILO (2018), includes social support, cleaning, education and health workers, which extraordinarily broadens the concept and mischaracterises it. These care workers are similar to other salaried

sectors, although they share with informal carers the type of tasks, their social devaluation and the gender hierarchies that underpin them. However, what differentiates the ‘caretariat’ and gives it its specificity seems to us to be not the tasks performed (similar to salaried carers), but the fact that informal carers have a different insertion into the capitalist system than employees (their work is unpaid!). It is this fact that marks their processes of subjectivation: they don’t have an employer who can be their antagonist and with whom they can negotiate wages; they don’t have trade unions; they don’t have the weapon of strike action; they are outside social protection systems and collective labour relations.

On the other hand, unpaid informal carers are, in familialist societies such as Portugal, the majority of carers and those who do so full-time are not small in number (in Portugal, there are an estimated 200,000, as mentioned above). Contrary to Durán’s perception when she presented her proposal around a decade ago, a process of collective subjectivation of informal carers has been underway in recent years, as the Portuguese case shows. These carers too, and not just the paid ones, have acquired a collective consciousness and have become a social agent, demanding recognition for their work and overcoming an imaginary of family care as a purely interpersonal and individualised relationship. Moreover, attempts to include unpaid caregivers in a broader movement can be seen in the contemporary ‘women*’s strike movement’, namely in Argentina, United States, Spain, Switzerland or Iceland between 2016 and 2024 – and also in Portugal, since 2019. As highlighted by Artus (2024), this serves as an example of an intersectional mobilization, situated between unions and the feminist movement, where care struggles are considered a crucial connection between the fight against patriarchy and the fight against capitalism.

The informal carers’ movement as a practice of ‘caretizenship’

The 1st National Meeting of Informal Carers of Alzheimer’s and Similar Dementias brought together 220 people in June 2016. It was an inaugural moment, where dozens of informal carers gave their testimony in front of their peers, who recognised each other’s stories. From this meeting came a committee responsible for drafting a public petition addressed to the government and parliament, which was put online at the beginning of August 2016. This document summarised their demands in fourteen points, including: the creation of a Legal Statute to ‘socially and legally recognise the condition of caring’; social support; tax deductions; psychosocial support; training and counselling for those who care; mutual help groups and intervention teams; the strengthening of the National Long-Term Care Network; the carer’s right to rest; the reduction of working hours to 50% of the working day, without loss of salary; the accounting of time dedicated to informal care to calculate retirement.

Between 2016 and 2019, informal carers organised numerous initiatives, using a diverse repertoire of struggle. They held a human cordon in front of Parliament (October 2016), two sit-ins (September 2017 and March 2018), a vigil (27 and 28 September 2018) and a joint action with the feminist movement to celebrate Women’s Day (8 March 2019). They promoted the first national demonstration of informal carers (19 May 2019) in Lisbon, with around 150 people. They attended numerous public hearings at the Portuguese Parliament and were officially received by the President of the Republic (February 2019) and the Government (May 2019). Since then, they have organised annual national meetings (the ninth national meeting was held in 2024), as well as regional meetings in different cities. In June 2018, they set up the National Association of Informal Carers (ANCI), which has consolidated itself as the public and institutional interlocutor for this reality of unpaid work. In the period between the 1st National Meeting and the approval of the Statute of the Informal Carer, the carers skilfully took advantage of a ‘structure of political opportunities’ (McAdam, 1982) in which the Assembly of the Republic had no parliamentary majority (i.e., the government depended on agreements with parties on the left) and in which the President of the Republic decided to ‘sponsor’ the cause, contributing significantly to an apparent consensus on the need to recognise this reality. Since then, in addition to its regular mutual support and institutional advocacy

activities, the National Association of Informal Carers has mobilised informal caregivers to participate in larger street demonstrations, notably on the 50th anniversary of the democratic revolution, celebrated on 25 April 2024, and in the May Day demonstrations organised by the main Portuguese trade union confederation. Moreover, a new petition to the Parliament was launched in January 2025 to amend the Statute of Informal Carers and labour legislation for carers, submitted with more than 9 thousand signatures at the end of June 2025, and which, at the time of writing, was still awaiting scheduling and debate.

Benefiting from the ‘novelty effect’, which made it possible to amplify the media impact of their actions, the group of petitioners and, later, the National Association of Informal Carers, has also been taking part in dozens of press, radio and television reports, as well as programmes (including general talk-shows and ‘entertainment’ programmes) in which, through biographical testimony, they removed informal care from the public invisibility to which it had been condemned.

Although the first political-legislative process was driven by a petition organised by informal carers of patients with Alzheimer’s and other dementias, the demand for a Statute was quickly taken up by a myriad of other groups. These included groups of mothers and fathers of disabled children, groups of pensioners and older persons, and groups associated with specific pathologies (for example, the association of carers of patients with amyotrophic lateral sclerosis). Despite the specificity of each approach and distinct concerns and experiences, the carers’ mobilisations unified them under a common identity and demands, reflected in the main slogans used at the gatherings, vigils and the demonstration: ‘What are we? Carers! What do we want? Dignity!’; ‘Justice for the status of the informal carer’; ‘Enough ignoring, carers exist’; ‘Informal carers work 24 h a day, 365 days a year! Respect!’; ‘Carers demand dignity! We want the Carers’ Statute approved’.

Where a view centred on the reproduction of social structures could only see factors of isolation, dispersion and conformist dispositions, the carers’ movement showed that the condition of informal carer was also an identity from which a collective consciousness of ‘caretariat’ could be built and a process of political mobilisation could take place. In this respect, the Portuguese case seems to be unique, since in other countries, carers’ movements are essentially led by professional carers (Hirata, 2021: 189; Lara et al., 2023). In Portugal, in a relatively short space of time (around three years), this sociologically improbable movement transformed experiences lived in isolation and often in a register of suffering into an identity of struggle and managed to achieve not only the ‘right to exist’ but also a centrality in public debate and a legal achievement, albeit with great limitations. In doing so, it has confronted Portuguese society with the demands of a ‘justice of care’ that implies an extension of existing public policies, but also the questioning of a familialist governance where there is a lack of universally accessible services capable of changing existing gendered orders.

In the diversity of its composition, the movement of informal carers has also revealed how an ‘ethic of care’ can be activated as a practice of resistance and contestation against the order that tends to atomise and privatise human existence. In this sense, it may be interesting to think of it as an expression of ‘caretizenship’. The term, which arose from a typo, was defended by Junco et al. (2004) as an alternative to citizenship. According to the authors, the liberal model of citizenship was built on the boundaries between public and private, which rendered the private sphere invisible; it was built on an individualistic and atomised conception of autonomy and of citizens as individual agents; on a conception of freedom with the market as its referent. For this reason, the rights of citizens in the public sphere have historically required the concealment of women in the private sphere. The fight to recognise care work would challenge these forms of exclusion, invisibility and the establishment of boundaries, pointing to an alternative model of recognition based on interdependence, mutual care, non-hierarchy and egalitarian relationships (Junco et al., 2004).

It seems to us that the reframing of informal care not as a family duty resulting from an ‘affective gift’, but as unpaid work that makes up for the lack of public provision of care, questions the inequality of the prevailing familialist regime of care and the conceptions of citizenship that underlie it, which are

hierarchical, reproduce class inequalities in access and strong gender asymmetries in the distribution of care. When informal carers say that ‘We’re not people, we’re labour at zero cost to the state’ (in Frazão, 2024), they are basically warning of the absence, in the current citizenship model, of a true ‘caretizenship’ that recognises this invisible work. At the same time, the self-organisation of informal carers, combining political demands directed at the State and prefigurative practices of solidarity, collective care and mutual support also demonstrate the political potential of care. The self-organization of carers, the mutual support structures and peer networks, the advocacy that arises from lived experience, the informal care opposed to commodified systems can be seen as having a connection with do-it-yourself movements and a ‘politics of structural care’ that is being articulated by several movements around the world, from grassroots activist mothers to abolitionist antiracism movements such as Black Lives Matter, fighting for a world where ‘everyone can care, and where everyone matters’ (Ticktin, 2024: 69)

Public policies, between recognition of care work and familialist regimes of expropriation

The care regime in Portugal combines the family, the state, the market and civil society in a particular configuration of familialisms, which is culturally implicit, but also explicitly prescribed by law and supported by the state in a highly selective way (Saraceno, 2016; Soeiro, 2023). Particularly noteworthy is the familialist slant and the weight of informal provision; the overwork of women and the impoverishment of those who provide informal care; the scarcity of formal care on offer, the low level of public investment and the consequent limits on access to social responses; the relegation of care to the realm of solidarity rather than rights; the predominance of the private non-profit sector in formal care and a logic of externalisation on the part of the state in the provision of care for dependent people (Canha, 2022; Dias and Lopes, 2016; Ferreira and Monteiro, 2015; Moreira, 2020; Silva, 2002; Soeiro, 2022).

The Statute of the Informal Carer, approved in 2019, had great symbolic importance, but its effects on adequate recognition and support have been limited. The law provided for the existence of a reference health professional to advise, support, empower and train the informal carer; a ‘specific intervention plan for the carer’; participation in support groups; psychosocial support; temporary care for the carer for up to 30 days a year; a student worker status for informal carers; an allowance paid to carers, depending on household income; access to a voluntary social security scheme; the possibility of accessing long-term unemployed status after the time spent providing care, if the period of care is equal to or greater than 25 months (Law no. ° 100/2019; cf Gil, 2023). Labour measures were subsequently enshrined in the revision of the Labour Code in 2023, including a parental leave scheme, a teleworking scheme, carer’s leave (five unpaid days per year, with ten days’ notice to the employer); flexible working hours and part-time work for up to four years; and legal protection against discrimination and in the event of dismissal (Law no. 13/2023).

In the negotiation between the different perspectives of the political parties and the government, the law seems to have prevailed as a kind of recognition of a partnership between informal care and the state, failing, on the one hand, to concretise alternative ways of responding to the family and, on the other, to tackle the dimension of gender inequality (Araújo and Soeiro, 2021; Canha, 2022). In this sense, the Statute confirms the familialist logic and may even perpetuate gender inequalities and the traditional division of roles: this is a risk identified when financial support measures for families do not specifically address gender inequalities (Canha, 2022; Pfau-Effinger, 2012). In essence, the Statute maintained the premise that informal care relates to the family sphere, which can be seen in the exclusion of neighbours that care, who do not live at the same tax address as the cared person. The cohabitation requirement has led many carers to abandon the recognition process (Gil, 2023).

In August 2024, there were 15.263 informal carers recognised by the Statute (84,4% women) and, of these, only 5.401 unpaid carers received the social benefit (carer’s support allowance), the average value of which was then 351.94 euros (ISS, 2024). This figure contrasts sharply with the estimate of around

200,000 full-time unpaid informal carers. The ‘means test’ required to access the benefit has contributed to many carers being refused the allowance (CAMAI, 2021). This selectivity criterion based on income has limited the access of thousands of carers to the allowance, which only applies to situations of poverty (monthly household income cannot exceed 662 euros, in 2024), thus distorting the principle for which it was created (Gil, 2023; ISS, 2024). Furthermore, the allowance cannot be paid to those receiving an old-age pension, which excludes thousands of retired informal carers.

The Statute can thus be considered an ambivalent instrument of recognition, resulting from the combination of several conflicting political orientations. On the one hand, it recognised the existence of care work, via a specific policy and a set of support measures. On the other hand, the criteria for this recognition are the family bond between the carer and the cared-for person or cohabitation. Thus, the legal status given to care is combined with the reiteration of ‘family solidarity’ or intergenerational solidarity as a social duty. The conditionality of the carer support allowance (through the assessment of household resources and the formula for calculating the amount paid to the carer) has limited the scope of financial support. It means that rather than compensation for unpaid work, the allowance is a benefit to combat poverty, a far cry from the national minimum wage, which is the level claimed by the National Association of Informal Carers.

In a tension between a policy for informal care that would involve an attempt to regulate an activity recognised as work; and another that would conceive of care policy as a family support policy; and yet another that would fit it into policies to combat poverty, it is possible to understand the Statute as inhabiting the space of the ‘border struggles’ mentioned by Fraser (2022). Indeed, the legal framework, legal protection and recognition of care in public policies challenge established categories, firstly about what is and is not work, but also the divisions between the contributory and non-contributory Social Security system, between the family solidarity subsystem and poverty eradication. It also challenges the conditions for true ‘caretizenship’ (Casas-Cortés, 2019; Junco et al., 2004), i.e., broad citizenship that takes informal care work, and not just paid employment, as a platform for access to rights and protections, while at the same time critically confronting the risks of this recognition contributing to the reproduction of a profoundly unequal gender order. Essentially, it is a matter of considering how to articulate public responses, self-organisation of collective care, and transformation of the gender order that feminises care and renders it invisible. The Portuguese experience helps us to understand the paradoxical position of informal care discussed by Peterie and Broom (2024) and the difficulties of caretizenship.

Provisional guidelines to think about mobilisations around care

Based on our case study, and seeking to use it as a subject for a theoretical reconstruction, we advocate the adoption of four guidelines for thinking about practices and mobilisations around care.

Firstly, in the wake of Dalla Costa and James (1972), of Graeber (2014), or Hirata (2021), reinventing our imaginary of work, giving centrality to all the people whose work is ‘taking care of other human beings, plants and animals’, of activities whose purpose is to maintain life and whose aim is to maintain and increase the wellbeing and freedom of others, and not just to produce goods for consumption. In essence, as we have insisted, de-commodifying and de-androcentrate our working-class representation.

Secondly, in the wake of Fraser (2022) recognising that labour struggles are not only carried out in spaces of market production. Domestic work, care work, emotional and affective work, the production of new generations of workers, and the work of maintaining social relations take place outside the market, but they are a precondition for the production of commodities. As Fraser (2022) explains, capitalism is not just an economic system but a broad ‘social order’ that depends on the non-market sphere. The struggles of informal carers are, therefore, not struggles ‘outside’ capitalism but are rather ‘border struggles’ both over what work is and around distinct ontologies of social practices that coexist in capitalist societies.

Thirdly, the challenge posed by the mobilisations of informal carers concerns not only the perimeters of work but also the freedom of the subject. Nakano Glen (2012) explains that the expropriation of care work involves multiple forms of coercion, ranging from moral persuasion to legal doctrines and legal duties, from internalised feelings to external constraints. The struggles of unpaid carers, insofar as they take place around semi-forced labour (Araújo and Soeiro, 2021), challenge the struggles for the emancipation of all labour.

Fourthly, it is important to think informal care not only from this political economy but also from its moral economy (Peterie and Broom, 2024), i.e., the ambivalent and contradictory forms of caring feelings and affective states that can originate and legitimise coercive relations and social injustice, but also forms of love, of knowing, of acting, and of relating that can create revolutionary political platforms and prefigurative practices of solidarity and joy (Ticktin, 2024)

Conclusions

The Portuguese case of informal carers' mobilisation, which emerged in 2016, offers a rich lens through which to think the relationship between care, labour, and political subjectivity. Informal carers have brought visibility to a reality of structural expropriation, operating as unpaid substitutes for a weakened welfare state. Their demands for recognition - articulated in petitions, public hearings, symbolic actions, and demonstrations - have questioned the androcentric conceptions of labour, challenging dominant assumptions about what counts as work. The participation of informal carers in the May Day trade union parade emphasizes how they think of themselves as a labour collective subject.

This notion of a care-based social subject gains empirical grounding within this case. The Portuguese 'caretariat' has articulated a collective identity rooted in the shared experience of overload, moral obligation, and impoverishment. Despite being politically and socially marginalised, informal carers were able to create forms of collective agency that expand our definitions of working class. At the same time, the movement's repertoires of action demonstrate how it is possible to operate with limited resources and utilize social media, petitions, symbolic occupations of public space, and advocacy to set the public agenda and condition the political agents. At the same time, some forms of mobilisation prefigure practices of 'caretizenship' based on interdependence, solidarity, self-organizations and cooperation.

At the policy level, the approval of the Statute of the Informal Carer revealed at the same time the strength of the movement, the limitations of the Portuguese welfare state, and the heavy permanence of a familialist logic, offering selective and conditional recognition that largely excludes carers who do not meet criteria of cohabitation or extreme poverty. This illustrates the political paradoxes of care recognition. While care is rhetorically valued, its material and institutional recognition remains minimal, and its symbolic validation coexists with material neglect and the reproduction of an unequal gender order.

The case study presented invites us to expand our sociological understanding of work and labour movements (transcending symbolic and disciplinary divisions as the ones that exist between sociology of the family /sociology of labour; economic / non-economic), and to rethink the boundaries and composition of the working class as a collective entity, reimagining it beyond the wage relation. It also contributes to deepen our political concerns about the potential of care in antagonistic movements, understanding care not only as a 'theme' of mobilisation, but also as a transversal dimension of our practices of struggle, that is, of prefigurative modes of action and of 'caretizenship'.

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Notes

1. As Junco et al. (2004) explain, the term ‘cuidadania’ in Spanish arose from a typo in a press release, but was eventually adopted by political activists and given a new meaning. It involves swapping the order of the letters i and u in the word ‘ciudadania’. Casas-Cortés (2019: 3) proposed the English translation ‘caretinzenship’, arguing that feminist precarity groups ‘have been able to re-signify and re-politicize conventional understandings and practices of citizenship in creative ways’, and proposes ‘to understand the activist concept of caretinzenship as a creative “erasure” and “democratic re-iteration” of the conventional notion of citizenship’.
2. Bennet and Guerra (2023:5) state that “plataformization provides an ideological environment that appropriates DIY values” that end up “being transmuted into an entrepreneurial and self-employment narrative that also extends to the increasing prevalence of immaterial labour.” They grasp the concept of “wageless life”, which was proposed to stress that the concept of workers or proletarians is much broader than waged workers. As Denning (2010) puts it, “We must insist that ‘proletarian’ is not a synonym for ‘wage labourer’ but for dispossession, expropriation and radical dependence on the market. (...) wageless life, not wage labour, is the starting point in understanding the free market”.
3. As she explains in this recent interview (Batthyány, 2022: 290), “once I decided that I had the word, then I had to fill it with content and polish it, and I can say that I am still in the process. For example, defining who belongs and what are the borders at which belonging to the care system ends: those who are paid, those who are only part-time, those who only deal with the ‘moral’ aspects or the intellectual responsibility of care, but not de facto, with the provision of services, in short”.

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