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To cite this article: Youyenn Teo (2016) Not everyone has ‘maids’: class differentials in the elusive quest for work-life balance, Gender, Place & Culture, 23:8, 1164-1178, DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2015.1136810

To link to this article: http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0966369X.2015.1136810

Published online: 01 Feb 2016.
Not everyone has ‘maids’: class differentials in the elusive quest for work-life balance

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ABSTRACT
Work–life balance has come to the fore in Singapore as in other countries. Debates have focused on uneven gendered burdens. Less attention has been paid to the ways in which class matters in shaping outcomes for women. In this article, I argue that the work-care regime in Singapore is one that generates uneven consequences for women along class lines. The historical legacy of eugenics-influenced pronatalism, the pursuit of a corporation-centric development, the persistent reticence toward universal provisions and corresponding preference for ‘private’ solutions to care create a context in which women in low-income households have an especially hard time balancing wage work and familial responsibilities. The individualization and marketization of household needs, in Singapore and elsewhere, obscure the circumstances, needs, and well-being of women in lower class circumstances, and undermine the value of housework and care labor.

No todxs tienen ‘mucamas’: diferencias de clase en la búsqueda elusiva del equilibrio entre la vida y el trabajo

RESUMEN
El equilibrio entre la vida y el trabajo ha pasado al primer plano en Singapur al igual que en otros países. Los debates se centran en las cargas desparejas entre los géneros. Menos atención se ha prestado a cómo influyen los asuntos de clase en el resultado para las mujeres. En este artículo, sostengo que el régimen de trabajo-cuido en Singapur genera consecuencias desiguales entre las mujeres según su clase. La herencia histórica del pronatalismo, influenciado por la eugenesia, la búsqueda de un desarrollo centrado en las corporaciones y la persistente reticencia hacia la cobertura universal y la correspondiente preferencia por las soluciones ‘privadas’ al cuidado, crean un contexto en el cual es mucho más difícil encontrar un equilibrio entre el trabajo asalariado y las responsabilidades del hogar para las mujeres de los hogares de bajos ingresos. La individualización y la mercantilización de las necesidades del hogar, en Singapur y otros lugares en general, esconden las circunstancias, necesidades y bienestar de las mujeres en situación de clase baja y socavan el valor del hogar y el trabajo del cuidado.
Introduction: work–life balance as class privilege

Jes (not her real name) is a thirty-year-old woman, a mother of three, ages 9, 7, and 5. When I interviewed her, she was in crisis mode. Her husband had recently left. She was working at two places: as a cook at a food stall in the mornings; and a supermarket cashier between 7 pm and 3 am at nights. The day before we spoke, she had run out of cash to buy food. Her boss from her morning job had offered more permanent work, but she was unable to accept it because she had yet to secure a place in the nearby childcare center for her youngest son. She pointed out that her oldest son could pick his little brother up from childcare if it was close to home. This would allow her to work continuously throughout the day.

Jes’ story was one I heard in various forms. Wage work is crucial to survive, but steady employment is hard to maintain when one has household and care responsibilities and no one to share or outsource any tasks to.

The problems Jes and other women like her face, although very much about balancing wage work and caregiving responsibilities, do not figure prominently in public discussions about work–life balance. Instead, discussions generally center around parental leave and human resource policies regarding ‘flexi-work’ (Ministry of Manpower 2015; Poh 2015). This framing tends to presume women and men in full-time, stable jobs – who have outsourced help in the form of unpaid and paid housekeepers and caregivers – whose major challenge lies in finding more family time.

This article addresses how class matters in work–life balance. I show that the rise of migrant domestic labor in Singapore is both an outcome of class-biased public policy and a reason public discussions persistently overlook the needs of lower income families. More generally, the individualization and marketization of household needs, in Singapore and elsewhere, obscure the circumstances, needs, and wellbeing of women in lower class circumstances, and undermine the value of housework and care labor.

Political economies of care and work

Over the past decades, there has been steady increase in women’s formal employment. This has, however, not been accompanied by an equal increase in men’s participation in housework and care labor (Gornick, Meyers, and Wright 2009; Ministry of Community Development, Youth and Sports 2009; OECD 2014). The experiences of overwork and scarcity of leisure; the emotional drain of needing to be at certain places at fixed times; and the stresses of feeling that one is failing on all fronts have been disproportionately borne by women (Berhau, Lareau, and Press 2011; Emslie and Hunt 2009; Lee and Choo 2001). Uneven roles in the domestic sphere compound gender inequalities in the professional realm: women are in less regular employment, face wage losses and diminished career advancement because of their familial – especially childrearing – responsibilities (Benard and Correll 2010; England 2010; Glass 2004; International Labour Office 2012; Ministry of Manpower 2012).
Scholars have shown that public policies are crucial in disrupting or reproducing gendered inequalities. They shape how families are defined and function, including who does care and wage labor (Daly 2010; Lister 2009; Teo 2013). The design of work–care regimes shapes the different claims women and men do and do not make on the state (O’Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999); the ‘choices’ they deploy when it comes to combining wage work and care responsibilities (Lewis and Campbell 2007; Teo 2015a); and the consequent experiences, well-being, and risks women and men bear (Saraceno 2011). Combinations of policies – paid leave from work for both women and men; flexible work arrangements; support for paid childcare; anti-discrimination laws that protect employees who are (potential or actual) caregivers – have been crucial to reshaping gendered norms and practices in both the domestic realm and the workplace (Ejnaes 2011; Ellingsaeter 1999; Gornick and Meyers 2009; Keck and Saraceno 2013). Conversely, social and labor market policies that are poorly harmonized alter roles for women without bringing about greater gender equality (Peng 2011).

While the studies cited above examine gendered divisions of labor within families and the effect policies have in shaping them, a second line of inquiry expands on the range of social actors involved by interrogating the roles of paid housekeepers and caregivers, and the intensifying global trend of migrant care workers (Ehrenreich and Hochschild 2003; Yeates 2009; Yeoh and Ramdas 2014). That women of lower social standing care for children of higher status women is not a recent trend (Glenn 1992; Romero 2002). Nonetheless, the expansion of migrant care work – through movement of women from less to more affluent places – is noteworthy (Isaksen, Devi, and Hochschild 2008; Kofman 2012). The reliance on women migrant care/domestic workers complicates the issue of gender inequality with intersecting inequalities around ethnonationality and class (Lan 2006; Parreñas 2008; Yan 2008); it generates new sites of conflicts as well as new modes of resistance both within and outside the domestic context (Constable 1997; Piper 2005; Yeoh, Huang, and Gonzalez 1999): as a solution to dual needs for wage work and care, it exacerbates its privatization and intensifies fissures in the interests of women – insofar as the hardships of women in the ‘global care chain’ enable wealthier women to obtain some semblance of work–life balance (Dyer, McDowell, and Batnitzky 2011; Hochschild 2000; Lan 2006; Parreñas 2000; Pratt 2012); finally, this global care chain involves not merely the resolution of labor needs – its articulation across societies produces neoliberal, middle-class subjects and subjectivities (Chin 1998; Ray and Qayum 2009).

In sum, we see that an understanding of contemporary political economies of care and work must involve attention to how states, through public policies and international relations, shape configurations of power among various actors. Power imbalances and varying interests are, moreover, not just between men and women but also among women, as people (including care workers) navigate their ways to fulfilling needs for wages and care. Importantly, understandings of work and care must encompass attention to the circumstances of a range of actors across class and ethnonational boundaries.

The Singapore case

The Singapore case presents promising potential for addressing a question suggested by these insights but not often posed in these terms: how does a work–care regime that depends heavily on migrant labor impact the lives of those who are not direct participants in the global care chain? Put more generally, in societies where the work–care regime is individualized and marketized, where the outsourcing of housework and care labor is dependent on individual capacity to pay, what happens to those who cannot do so? For people who are embedded in contexts where paid caregivers play major roles, what happens in the absence of paid caregivers? In Singapore and elsewhere, insofar as neoliberal capitalist logic reigns and individual ‘choice’ is valorized over collective solutions, the circumstances of people who do not have adequate material means to make real choices are often obscured.

In this article, I turn my attention to class differentials in work–care regimes, focusing on people in low-income households who live in a social context where individualized outsourcing of care and housework is presumed. Scholars critical of welfare regimes and attentive to the everyday realities of the poor have documented how low-income women’s needs and contributions are often overlooked and
Data and methods

The article addresses two main empirical questions: what is the nature of the work-care regime in Singapore, and how is class articulated within it? How are the lives of the lower income affected by this regime?

I analyze three sources of data: primary and secondary sources which track or describe key events and turning points in the Singapore state’s policies around population, work, and care; policy documents which specify both purposes and criteria of various policies and programs aimed at addressing the care of children; and interviews with women in low-income households.

Scholars have discussed the history of the Singapore state’s approach to population and fertility, which is the basis for its work-care policies, at length (Saw 2005; Yap 2007). Through these documentations of key historical stages and speeches by government officials, I relate what is quite well known in Singapore: population policies have historically been class-differentiated.

What is less remarked upon is that class differentiation persists in contemporary policies and has become more subtle and impactful through institutionalization. To establish this, I analyze policies targeted at fertility and caregiving over the past few decades. I pay particular attention to the principles embedded in the policies – examining qualifying criteria, means of delivery, and the form and content of support or sanction.

Finally, the article draws from a larger project on the everyday experiences of poverty in Singapore. Between 2013 and 2015, I conducted fieldwork in two neighborhoods where residents live in public rental flats. The flats are rented out by the Housing and Development Board (HDB) to residents whose household income is below S$1500 per month. Based on the average household size in such flats (2.4 persons) (Singapore Department of Statistics 2014b), this implies per capita monthly income of roughly S$625. This is about a quarter of the median monthly household income from work per capita in the country (S$2380 in 2014) (Singapore Department of Statistics 2014a).

My visits were enabled by a community organization. I accompanied community workers on home visits. The visits were sometimes targeted at addressing specific problems or needs of families or to spread news and recruit participants for programs; equally often, they were visits to stay in touch with people and to learn about what was going on in their lives. We were often invited into homes, where we usually sat on the floor; living rooms typically did double-duty as sleeping areas at night, so most homes did not have couches or chairs. Through casual conversation, people talked about aspects of their life trajectories and everyday habits. They also tended to discuss crises and struggles, because these are so endemic. In a handful of cases, I interviewed people more formally after the initial visit. To date, I have visited the neighborhoods 70 times and met over a hundred people. I also attended a few events, organized by the community organization, where residents gathered to discuss issues affecting the community. For purposes of this article, I draw on one particularly salient observation that emerged: women in low-income households face myriad challenges when it comes to fulfilling needs for both wages and care.

In what follows, I show how existing policies ostensibly aimed at supporting families’ care needs render invisible the real labor that has to be done in the home. The pursuit of migrant domestic workers as a solution, in particular, undermines the needs of low-income women who do a lot of this invisible labor.

Work-care regimes and class inequalities

Singapore’s work-care regime has three characteristics with class implications: (1) strong and class-calibrated state interventions on fertility and family formation; (2) a neoliberal employment regime in which corporations have great leeway and workers limited leverage; and (3) solutions to care needs that are individualized and market-based rather than universal and publicly provided.
Strong state apparatus and class-calibrated attention to fertility

The Singapore state is strong in terms of political dominance and institutional coherence. It coordinates and regulates everyday life to an extraordinary degree. A key site of regulation is that of the familial in general, and fertility in particular.

Anxieties about low fertility form the backdrop to contemporary efforts to improve work–life balance. State interventions in fertility were established early in the nation-state's history and have persisted to this day. The intense intervention on fertility – and in particular an ethnoracialized, classed, and gendered mode of articulating fertility problems – continues to frame how the state resolves work–care needs.

The Singapore state, in line with international wisdom about national development in the 1960s, was antinatalist – encouraging Singaporeans with slogans such as 'Stop at Two' and 'Boy or Girl – Two is Enough,' and putting in place measures that penalized those who had three or more children (Heng and Devan 1995; Saw 2005; Wong and Yeoh 2003). The pronatalist turn came in the early 1980s. This was in response not just to falling fertility rates but also to uneven declines – with the sharpest reductions among ethnic Chinese Singaporeans and, in particular, the well educated (Lee 1983). The state therefore targeted a specific class of women, the university-educated – disproportionately ethnic Chinese – to have more children (Heng and Devan 1995). A eugenics rationale – that more-educated women produce more intelligent children – propelled these early pronatalist policies.

The contemporary work–care regime – as expressed in policies around maternity/paternity leave; the structure and preconditions of childcare support; and subsidies for support of children – continues to be underpinned by a desire to differentially encourage/discourage fertility along intersecting lines of ethnicity and class, as well as strong presumptions about gendered caregiving.

Several examples illustrate this: first, support for children is partly delivered through tax reliefs for married women. Given that about half of the working population pays no income taxes at all, and that women earn less than men, this form of support is essentially limited to higher income women.

Second, the Baby Bonus – consisting of a cash component and a co-savings account where individuals receive matching funds from the state when they deposit cash into an account in their child’s name – also has class implications. Parents may put money into a child’s account until she/he is 12 years old. The government deposits matching funds in these amounts: up to $6000 for the first and second children; up to $12,000 for third and fourth children; up to $18,000 for fifth or subsequent children. The more disposable income one has, the more one is able to put cash into the account, and the more the government provides. That higher order children receive more co-savings indicates that it is not the low-income with multiple children who are targeted for this particular scheme.

In contrast, the HOPE Scheme (Home Ownership Plus Education) provides housing grants and various subsidies to low-income and less-educated married couples (or divorced/widowed women with child custody), on condition that they limit their fertility to two children. The maximum benefits of the scheme are reaped when applicants undergo irreversible sterilization.

A neoliberal employment regime

National development in the form of economic growth has been central to the state’s purpose (Teo 2011). A key strategy has been to render Singapore a place conducive to businesses and investors – particularly foreign ones (Lim 2013). To this end, the state has constructed a relatively liberal tax regime as well as a dociled labor regime.

A key component of state-led development in Singapore and East Asia has revolved around contestation with and eventual suppression of labor (Deyo 1989). In contemporary Singapore, labor has limited autonomy to lobby independently; they have little room to organize save for through state-sanctioned unions, and no right to strike (Hui 2011; Lim 2013). Workers thus have limited leverage to directly bargain for changes in the workplace. Key features of the work–care regime in Singapore have to be interpreted in this light.
Despite a great deal of rhetoric by state agencies and businesses around work–life harmony, care needs of employees – whether the provision of health insurance for dependents or support for childcare – generally fall outside the purview of employers’ formal responsibility. Wages, work hours, and job security – crucial conditions that shape people’s capacities and choices regarding the balance of wage work and care responsibilities (Clawson and Gerstel 2014) – are issues on which employers set the terms. Unsurprisingly, class differences matter: companies’ treatment of workers depend on where in the ranks employees stand; job security varies depending on how replaceable workers are and less-educated, low-wage workers are particularly vulnerable to job losses and have the least bargaining power. Consequently, there is unevenness in workers’ capacities to balance wage work and care responsibilities. Put more generally, absent of universal provisions, market rewards also map onto uneven capacities in making market choices. The work–care regime as shaped by the state–corporate nexus is one in which the capacity to balance work and care is differentiated along lines of any given person’s market value.

Individualized and market-based solutions to care

In comparing care solutions across countries, Naldini, Wall, and Le Bihan (2013) provide a useful framework that analyzes combinations of formal paid care, semi-formal paid care, and informal unpaid care. This helps us think about care needs as having multiple forms of fulfillment, and care gaps and inequalities as arising when certain modes dominate or fall short.

In Singapore, formal paid care in childcare centers is on the rise but not universally accessible; semi-formal paid care within the home by foreign domestic workers is rising among the middle-to-high income but largely absent for the lower income; informal unpaid care by grandparents is significant for those at the middle and higher ends of the income spectrum and care by mothers is relatively important for those at the high and low ends of the income spectrum.

These patterns arise in the context of two intertwining policy principles: strong reticence to universal provisions, and deep reliance on individualized solutions that depend on the capacity to pay.

In the past few years, places in infant care and childcare centers have increased. From 2009 to 2014, childcare center places increased from 67,980 to 104,774, while infant care center places increased from 2011 to 5329 (Early Childhood Development Agency 2014). Infant care centers care for children aged 6 to 18 months, while childcare centers care for children between 18 months and 6 years. There are also kindergartens which children between ages 4 and 6 may attend for 3–4 h a day. The Compulsory Education Act requires that children begin Primary School the year they turn 7. Enrolment into childcare centers or kindergartens prior to this is not mandated nor universally provided. Childcare center hours are generally 7 am to 7 pm, which means they are quite well suited to people whose jobs are during typical office hours but less so for low-income workers who are more likely to be in shift work.

There are two major state-linked operators – one run by the national, state-controlled, workers’ union (NTUC My First Skool), and another run by the ruling political party (PAP Community Foundation Sparkletots Preschool). Private companies operate other centers. In 2014, three anchor operators – one linked to a religious organization (the YMCA) and two explicitly for-profit commercial operators – were appointed by the regulatory government agency, the Early Childhood Development Agency – with the intention of quickly expanding the number of places. They receive direct public subsidies and are to abide by regulations around fee caps (Ng and Chia 2014). Despite the presence of state players, the preschool and childcare sector is generally run as for-profit businesses.

The particular mix of public and private players has resulted in wide-ranging fees and public perception that quality of care and education varies with cost – with more expensive centers/schools providing superior services compared to cheaper ‘public’ ones. Even though there are public subsidies, then, this bifurcation of services undermines the sense that childcare is a public, evenly distributed universal good.

In addition to this private–public mix and divide, the deployment of state subsidies further ensures individualization (versus universalization) of formal childcare. Subsidies to childcare centers vary depending on household income and employment status of mothers. Basic subsidies are available for
all children who are Singapore citizens, with employed mothers receiving $300 and non-employed mothers $150. Additional subsidies are available for children from households earning below $7500 (or $1875 per capita in households with at least five people, including at least two dependents), but to qualify for additional subsidies, a mother (or where no mother is present, a single father) must work a total of at least 56 h per month (Early Childhood Development Agency 2013). For low-income mothers in particular, then, employment is a precondition to formal childcare.

Interestingly, childcare centers are undersubscribed, with more places than children enrolled. In 2014, there were 104,774 places and 82,237 enrollments (Early Childhood Development Agency 2014). Part of the reason for this may be that the locations are not perfectly matched to people's needs (more on this later). A more significant reason, however, appears to be the major roles played by migrant domestic workers and grandparents within middle- and upper-middle-class households and the norms this has produced regarding the importance of home-based care (Teo 2010).

The expansion of the formal childcare sector happened very recently – in the past five years or so. In contrast, for about four decades, since 1978, the state has managed the demand for care and household labor primarily by regulating the influx of female domestic workers from neighboring Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka (Lazar 2001; Yeoh, Huang, and Gonzalez 1999). This has been to 'make it easier for married women to work, look after their households, and bring up more children' (Singapore Government 1988). State support for hiring domestic workers has thus historically been directed at working married mothers and oriented toward women who make sufficient wages to replace their labor in the household.

Migrant women's labor is relatively low-cost because of economic inequalities between Singapore and worker-sending countries. They are, furthermore, highly exploitable – closely monitored and disciplined within households; with limited rest time and no maximum work hours; with no workers' rights to negotiate or organize; the rules and regulations governing their entry and stay in Singapore strongly favor employers' needs over workers' well-being (Humanitarian Organization for Migration Economics 2015; Teo and Piper 2009). The number of migrant domestic workers employed as live-in 'maids' (or in contemporary parlance, 'helpers') in individual households has been steadily increasing – from 40,000 in 1988 (Singapore Government 1988) to 218,300 in 2014 (Ministry of Manpower 2014). About one in five households now employ a migrant domestic worker. While this mode of resolving care needs is more accessible to higher income households, it has set norms about the importance of home-based care and the necessity of having paid help for certain chores that might otherwise either be done less frequently (e.g. washing of cars or windows; ironing of clothes), or done very differently (e.g. by men and children who are members of the household rather than primarily by women either paid or unpaid).

Aside from domestic workers, grandparents provide a form of semi-formal care within the home. While generally unpaid, there are relations of reciprocity embedded within. Care of the elderly, even more so than childcare, is individualized and seen as the purview of the family and best provided at home. So while grandparents are generally not directly paid when they care for their grandchildren, adult children are very much responsible for the well-being of their parents (Ramdas 2015), and a main source of retirement income (Ng 2013). In other words, there are expectations among the middle-class that the care will be reversed in the long run when grandparent caregivers age and need support and care.

The care of children by grandparents quite often overlaps with care by domestic workers (Teo et al. 2006). The ethnonational and class otherness of migrant domestic workers is a source of anxiety (Yeoh 2004). Grandparents are often involved in supervising domestic workers and are roped in to be around because parents do not trust domestic workers alone with children (Teo 2011). This distrust is expressed openly, frequently with racist/classist overtones, in conversations among Singaporeans as well as on various online forum pages. While increasingly ubiquitous, the 'maid' solution is experienced as somehow problematic. Particularly for younger children, then, grandparents – and in particular grandmothers – play major roles as caregivers, either with or without domestic workers. The state signals its support for this source of care by giving a tax relief called the Grandparent Caregiver Relief; it further signals that caregiving is women's work and that marriage should be the precondition for childbearing by limiting this relief to working married women.
Aside from live-in domestic workers and grandparents, there are not many other options for semiformal paid care. There are some women providing babysitting services to neighbors or relatives in their own homes, but this appears to be becoming less common and there is no public support for it.

Each of what I have described above – class-calibrated fertility interventions; a corporate environment where employers have great influence in setting the terms of employment; and the centrality of individualized, market-dependent childcare solutions – constitutes a societal and policy context in which low-income women’s care needs are overlooked and neglected. I turn next to discussing their experiences in such a work–care regime.

Low-income women in the work-care regime

While women have generally gained parity with men in education, their employment patterns and familial roles are still significantly different. Women who are less-educated are particularly likely to be unemployed.

Women are well represented in the workforce when they first leave school but their participation rate starts to drop in their 30s. In 2013, the labor force participation rate of women between 25 and 54 years old was 74.3%, while that for men in the same age range was 92.4% (Ministry of Manpower 2013). Women’s employment throughout their 30s, 40s, and 50s continually declines at a higher rate than men’s, indicating that most do not return to work once they leave. In 2012, while the employment rate for men aged 55 to 59 stood at 88%, only 56% of women in that age group were still employed (Ministry of Manpower 2012). Among ‘economically inactive’ persons – those aged 15 and above who are neither employed nor looking for employment – about 65% are women (Ministry of Manpower 2013). The rate of economic inactivity among women, at 42%, is almost double that for men, at 24%. Significantly, most women outside the formal workforce list housework and childcare as primary reasons: 45% of women who are neither employed nor looking for employment cite family responsibilities as reason, while only 2% of economically inactive men cite this reason. In 2013, the labor force participation rates of married women stood at 61%, in contrast to married men’s participation rate of 84.5%. Additionally, among the economically inactive, a large majority (75%) are people with secondary education or lower. Women with less education are thus most likely to be economically inactive.

Women in low-income situations face intertwined challenges: first, they have difficulty accessing formal and semi-formal childcare that adequately addresses their needs. Second, they have difficulties securing employment that is stable, predictable, and allows for enough flexibility for them to take care of their households and children. Consequently, combining wage work and care responsibilities is particularly difficult.

Accessing services that fulfill needs: hidden unaffordability and inaccessibility

In welfare regimes characterized as liberal, policies tend to be designed to work through market mechanisms (Esping-Andersen 1990; O’Connor, Orloff, and Shaver 1999). A key dimension of state measures directed at low-income persons in such regimes is wariness toward disrupting economic incentives for work and breeding of ‘dependence’ (Hays 2003). The Singapore case – though not usually characterized outright as liberal because it also has a strong familialist bent (Croissant 2004; Esping-Andersen 1997; Teo 2015b) – shares this orientation toward valorizing employment to prevent ‘dependence.’

Employment is a key criterion to most forms of aid directed at the low-income. This includes subsidies for childcare centers. This is ostensibly to get women from low-income households into the formal work force. In principle, this could be positive for women in low-income households insofar as they are freed up for wage work and assuming employment improves their individual and household circumstances. Yet, accessing childcare is not always straightforward.

Space and distance pose particularly challenges to the low-income. Childcare within walking distance of homes is critical. Although more places have been created in childcare centers in recent years, they
are not always located where low-income families need them; women I met regularly lamented not being able to secure spaces for their children and/or being on long wait-lists. The difference between walking and busing distance is very significant. First, transportation costs are a factor that shape low-income persons' decisions and well-being far more than higher income persons'. Second, particularly when people have more than one young child, it is challenging to get multiple children to where they need to be in addition to getting to work on time. Finally, wage work and childcare center hours rarely coincide perfectly. This means that there are times of day where care gaps emerge. When childcare centers are within walking distance, parents can arrange for neighbors or their older children to pick up and care for younger siblings for short periods of time. Jes, whose story I began with, was hoping to secure childcare within walking distance of her flat precisely because her oldest son could then pick up her youngest while she was still at work.

Another hidden difficulty experienced by low-income parents has to do with sunk costs. Huda, a 24-year-old single mother of two, for example, told me that she could not afford the deposit of S$1000 that a childcare center required from her and so she put her child in a kindergarten instead. Her six-year-old is hence only cared for 3 h (versus up to 12 h at a childcare center) – inadequate for her to take on a full-time job with regular hours. Huda has no choice but to piece together ad hoc work, often during the night shift, at great cost to her health and well-being.

While subsidies exist both for childcare centers and kindergartens, there are usually still deposits and other costs for things like uniforms. This fits with the state's general mode of creating co-payments for the ostensible reason of maintaining self-reliance and individual responsibility. Some respondents' experiences indicate that there are ways of getting around these costs and indeed, officially, there are Start-up Grants. However, these are processed on case-by-base bases. Consequently, unless an applicant knows to ask or an administrator processing applications offers, people may not know about the various forms of aid they are eligible for. Like Huda, many take at face value what is asked from them and look for other options when they figure they cannot afford something. The issues of dignity and stigma are noteworthy here: just as middle-class persons generally do not think to ask for discounts at designer boutiques, persons with low-income do not want to come across as asking for things that others do not need. The frequent negative experiences people tell me about when they do apply for aid – multiple documents they have to produce, intrusive personal questions they are compelled to answer – also put many off actively seeking assistance.

The use of childcare centers, then, is not as straightforward as one would expect, and there are reasons for their inaccessibility that are not obvious from looking at policy provisions. Even if children are in full-time childcare, care gaps persist. Here, we have to look at the sort of jobs people from low-income households have access to.

Work and lack of mastery over time

Work-life balance is an elusive thing for women (and men) in many national contexts (Garey and Hansen 2011; Gornick, Meyers, and Wright 2009; Keck and Saraceno 2013; Naldini, Wall, and Le Bihan 2013; Razavi, Hassim, and United Nations Research Institute for Social Development 2006). Part of this has to do with the fact that wage workers are often lacking in bargaining power and face a global economy in which their labor is replaceable (Standing 2011). Clawson and Gerstel (2014) show that the confluence of gender and class shapes the capacity to manage this unpredictability; women in low-income households face especially difficult conditions when it comes to managing wage work and familial responsibilities.

Most of the people I met have limited educational credentials. The jobs they have access to are poor-quality jobs. Respondents talked about their work being physically strenuous; they recounted being stressed insofar as supervisors and/or customers are demanding and disrespectful; they have limited bargaining power and do not generally try to negotiate the terms of their employment; above all, their pay is low. Often, women work as cleaners (i.e. janitors), workers in food service (often in school canteens), ‘schoolbus aunties’ (assisting in taking care of children as they board and alight from
schoolbuses), and supermarket cashiers. The work might be full-time or part-time; in either case, they do not allow much control over hours. If people are asked to do ‘OT’ (overtime), they do it or risk being fired. The types of jobs they are in are such that working from home is almost never an option. There is also more night-shift work among the low-income than the higher-income; work hours, then, often do not coincide perfectly with childcare center hours.

The lack of mastery over time and the general poor quality of work makes it hard to maintain stable employment. Things that people in higher class positions take for granted – taking time off because of a persistent toothache, for example – can result in having to leave a job. These conditions affect both men and women, but are particularly problematic for women insofar as they bear heavier responsibility for housework and children. The many small emergencies that arise when one has dependents disrupt their employment.

The state’s requirement that mothers work in order to qualify for childcare center subsidies is therefore not easy to fulfill. To fully appreciate this, we also have to take seriously the labor that goes into maintaining households and caring for children.

**Housework is work, care labor is work**

Dila is a single mother of two, ages 9 and 7. When we spoke, she was having a hard time meeting basic needs. She scraps together work cleaning and ironing clothes in people’s homes, earning about S$1000 a month. When Dila and other women in similar circumstances (i.e. no permanent disabilities) seek assistance from the state, they are told to put their children in formal care and find full-time employment. She has received some assistance for rent and utilities in the past, but no cash, which is what she needs on an everyday basis. For this, she ‘must say A to Z, they need to know everything,’ which she finds intrusive. Although meeting daily material needs is a real struggle, she has not tried to get more help. She cannot accept the requirement that she find more employment because she feels strongly that her children need her to be present. Tearfully, she recounted her own childhood of always being left alone and her eventual drug addiction and multiple incarcerations.

Among the low-income I meet, there are mothers who are employed part-time, full-time, or not at all. In all cases, they have work to do. Housework takes up a lot of energy and time in all households. In certain ways, this is intensified in lower-income homes. The work of maintaining a clean flat, for example, is harder when bedbugs are a common problem in one’s neighborhood. Somewhat counter-intuitively, the small flats they live in also require more effort to maintain because each household member has limited space and messiness more easily intrudes on shared space. Mattresses that are laid out in the living room at night, for example, have to be packed up and kept away every morning. Errands, too, are more time-consuming when one has limited money: many low-income households have prepaid cards that they must ‘top up’ in order to have electricity, and they have enough cash to top up only S$10–20 each time, which implies that they have to visit the post office every week for this purpose. Their lack of cash also means they have to shop for groceries more frequently than people with more cash to stock up. When it comes to caring for children, class disadvantage also intensifies stress. While middle- and upper-middle-class kids have scheduled activities that keep them occupied, parents with limited means struggle to engage their restless kids in the hours after school. Many express worry that their kids will fail exams, drop out of school, fall into bad company, pick up smoking or drugs, or become teenage parents.

Given needs for mothers to do housework, run errands, and watch over their children, wage work is hard to maintain. Where mothers are employed, the stress of still having to do all this labor is intense. Families have to bear the cost of strained relationships; women recounted stories of conflicts with husbands and children when they are employed and not around to take care of everyone. They speak of children getting into trouble – not going to school and lying about it, staying out in the neighborhood until late into the night, and getting into other kinds of trouble like stealing or drugs. Many families I met have experienced some of these problems; where they can, they thus make the ‘choice’ to rely on
one wage earner, even though this means they cannot fully pay their debts, that the breadwinner feels intense stress, and the family lives in endemic distress.

To date, public policy has not adequately addressed these particular challenges and needs. While low education and low wages are now matters of public debate and embedded in policy reform, little attention has been paid to how women with household and caregiving responsibilities have to meet complex demands before they can seek the many training programs that are currently offered (Teo 2015c). Insufficient attention has been paid to the conditions of low-wage work; adequate wages, some degree of flexibility, dignity and respect, are important preconditions that have not been seriously considered. While the number of state-supported childcare centers has grown, the combination of complaints about insufficient space with reports that there are in fact more spaces than children suggests that consideration has not been adequately given to where these centers need to be located and how hidden costs and other conditions may prevent everyone from accessing them.

Public policy has been biased toward solutions that depend too heavily on private resources. In facilitating employment of migrant domestic workers as solutions to work–life balance, the intense labor required to maintain households and raise children has been rendered both of low monetary value and invisible. The insistence on low-income mothers’ employment as precondition to childcare subsidies is premised on the idea that this is crucial to ‘self-reliance.’ In this schema, the work low-income mothers do as caregivers and housekeepers – and therefore the unpaid labor of social reproduction (Kofman 2012) they do on an everyday basis – has no value and goes largely unacknowledged. It follows that public policy has not seriously addressed questions about who is to do the work, and what conditions have to be altered, in order for all women to be able to make real choices about wage work.

**Work–life balance debates**

In 2012, Anne-Marie Slaughter launched intense debates when her article, ‘Why Women Still Can’t Have It All,’ appeared in *The Atlantic* (Slaughter 2012). Slaughter hit a nerve by pointing out that the many conditions women face, at work and at home, make it impossible for women to fully ‘have it all’ – where ‘all’ entails marriage, children, and high-powered careers. She proposed that changing these circumstances would involve increasing the number of women in government and through the gender-sensitive policy-making that would follow. She argued, in particular, that policies in the workplace have to shift to really accommodate demands of both work and home.

Slaughter’s piece was widely read and discussed in Singapore. Indeed, in May 2014, an auditorium packed with academics, civil servants, and corporate leaders warmly received her at the Singapore Management University. Slaughter’s arguments and proposed solutions found support; that work–life balance requires corporations to allow for flexible work schedules and career trajectories were especially salient.

Cottom has eloquently argued that Slaughter’s article is problematic not because it is wrong, but because it represents a limited sliver of women’s experiences; specifically, it obscures the lived realities of women who are neither ethnoracially dominant nor class-privileged (Cottom 2012). In Slaughter’s prescriptions for resolution, Cottom argues, Slaughter also too quickly presumes that (white, upper-class) women in power would be the solution to these particular problems, and that there would be trickle-down effects from women with relative power to those with less.

At a more general level, Fraser (2013) critiques the trend of privileging individual choice, autonomy, and career advancement, arguing that it obscures earlier feminist movements’ goals for greater social justice, solidarity, and participatory democracy. This mode of thinking about women’s advancement serves to legitimate the undemocratic and exploitative tendencies of neoliberal capitalism.

Cottom and Fraser both remind us that when problems are framed in particular ways, conversations generally stay within the framework. Slaughter’s warm reception in Singapore, by a relatively privileged audience, is an instance of a larger and regular obscuring of the full range of problems, solutions and social actors tied up in political economies of work–care regimes.
Middle-class biases are not inherently problematic; these, too, are real people’s lives and problems, which we need solutions for. The problem is that these middle-class biases and this universalizing tendency are endemic to public discussions and policies oriented toward care and work issues. In Singapore, there has been a specific tradition of class bifurcation that has evolved such that women’s value as mothers are class-differentiated. Crucially, the pursuit of migrant domestic workers’ labor as a key resolution to people’s housekeeping and care responsibilities has meant that this labor has become more devalued and invisible. Women in low-income households, when addressed in public policy, are not imagined as persons with these particular roles, who do this work; the amount of work and hardship that goes into creating a work–life balance in these situations is thus obscured.

As feminist scholars and activists challenge existing state policies, societal norms, and corporate practices, we must continually insert into conversation class variations. This means more attention to the ways in which public policy addresses women’s needs in uneven ways; more critique of work–life balance policies that neglect the actual labor that happens in the home; deeper thinking about the ways in which labor within the home can be supported; more integration of discussion of low wages and work conditions when workplace policies are addressed; and an expanded view in thinking about the effects of paid domestic work on public policy and the well-being of various groups in society. The tempting language of individual ‘choice’ that so often obscures social inequalities and injustice needs to be rearticulated such that we more fully consider all citizens’ rights to dignity and well-being.

Notes

1. Issues around care of the elderly and disabled are also important, and require separate analysis beyond the scope of this article.
2. See, for example, ‘Winter’ (2015) and ‘Miss Vanda’ (2015).

Acknowledgements

I thank my respondents and the community workers who generously shared their time, experiences, and insights. For their advice on this paper, my thanks go to C.J. Pascoe, Ito Peng, Raka Ray, Teresa Sharpe, as well as Pamela Moss and the anonymous reviewers at Gender, Place and Culture. The paper was presented at the ISA World Congress in Yokohama in July 2014, at a session on the Global Migration of Care Work, and also at a seminar organized by the Association of Women for Action and Research in November 2014 — thank you to attendees of these events who provided rich feedback.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by the Singapore Ministry of Education [grant number RG74/12].

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