Three Essays on “Doing Care”: Gender and the Length of the Work Day in Rural India

My dissertation examines the effect of being responsible for unpaid care on women's work hours in rural India. One debate in western, industrialized countries concerns the relative importance of bargaining power versus "doing gender". While paid work offers women economic independence to reduce unpaid work, they may also increase unpaid work to remain accountably 'feminine'. In developing countries, divorce is uncommon limiting the threat of exit, and meeting care responsibilities is also a subsistence requirement besides “doing gender”. Research on the bargaining effects of being responsible for dependents and of paid work is sparse in developing countries. I develop a theory of “doing care” from my qualitative field work as well as theories of institutional bargaining and “doing gender”: rural women are compelled to provide hours of care work because it is a subsistence necessity that men are not culturally obliged to meet, and women's ability to resist cultural obligations are weakened by gendered norms, rules and practices.

In my second essay, I examine the effects of “doing care” for the length of the workday. Income-earning hours lengthen the work day of rural Indian wives' because (1) they are responsible for children and the threat of withholding care is not credible, and (2) care work cannot easily be substituted with earned incomes in low-wage, agrarian economies. Multivariate regression using married couples' information from the Indian Time Use survey (ITUS) of 1998-99 confirms several hypotheses: An increase in young children per adult increases wives' care work as well as total work hours by 0.74 per day. For wives', every additional hour of paid work in a day reduces care work by 0.56 and leaves them working 0.44 hour more in total. Yet, the effect of norms are such that Adivasis (a low income social group with less binding marriage rules) substitute more income-earning hours for care work compared to Dalits (another low income social group). This result suggests Adivasis do not face social sanctions for doing less care work, which is supported by my qualitative findings.

My third paper investigates the trade-off between “doing care” and direct child care time. Longer work days result in women prioritizing tasks such as cooking, fetching water, and earning incomes over direct hands-on child care. Regression on married couples' information from ITUS data confirms that wives' hours of direct child care reduces by 0.14 per day for every hour devoted to all other work, and 0.02 for every hour of indirect care work. There are no significant effects on husbands' hours of direct child care for increased hours of other work, or indirect care. My results have strong implications for current policy discussions in India on public child care provision and maternity entitlements.