

Summary

Who makes the difference?

Social inequality in the conditions for and consequences of informal help

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Wie maakt het verschil?

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On 26 January 2017, Alice de Boer, a researcher at the Netherlands Institute for Social Research | SCP in The Hague, delivered her inaugural lecture as professor of an endowed chair in Social Inequality and Informal Help in the Faculty of Social Sciences at VU University Amsterdam. *Who makes the difference? Social inequality in the conditions for and consequences of informal help.*

Lots of people in the Netherlands are currently providing informal help: there are more than four million informal carers and almost a million volunteers providing care and support. A good deal of concern has been expressed in the public debate about this unpaid help and about the specific groups who provide it. There are fears that the pressure of the 'participation society' and the greater responsibility being placed on the shoulders of citizens will mean that the provision of informal care falls disproportionately on to the shoulders of certain groups, including women, people in certain age groups and migrants.

[Social inequality in the provision of informal help](#)

In her inaugural lecture, Alice de Boer examines the extent of social inequality in the provision of informal help. She discusses differences in the provision of informal help by men and women, younger and older persons and migrants and non-migrants, and explores how those differences arise. Among other things, Alice looks at the conditions under which people from certain social categories are willing and able to provide informal help. She then discusses the negative consequences for these groups of providing help, in terms of well-being, perceived burden, work and education.

[Who makes the difference?](#)

Alice also examines the question of who could help reduce the burden caused by providing help – in other words, who makes the difference? In the first instance, informal carers and the care recipients could make a difference themselves by calling in help at an early enough stage, for example by more actively seeking people with whom the care provision could be shared. These need not just be family members, but could also be people from other networks of which informal helpers are members and who could actively offer help. This would be a case of 'many hands make light work', and informal carers might undergo fewer negative experiences; sharing the care eases the burden.

In addition, all kinds of organisations can help to reduce the burden, such as employers, education establishments, local authorities and home care organisations. What kind of support do these organisations currently provide? Employers can help make it easier to combine work and care tasks, for example through leave arrangements, by encouraging open discussion of an employee's care obligations,

showing understanding and making flexible working possible if the informal care situation calls for this. Research has shown that it is important for people to be able to take a day off unexpectedly or to have some say in arranging their own working hours.

There are many more members of civil society active in providing support for informal carers, such as volunteering and welfare organisations, churches, care cooperatives, etc. The conclusion is thus that there are a great many people and organisations that could offer help. Despite this, little is known about who could make the difference and how. For example, it is unclear what the impact of different interventions in the field of informal care might be, and whether some forms of support would have a different effect on different carers, such as men and women or different migrant groups.