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UCT lecture champions the unseen labour of care



Professor Elena Moore

Photo: Lerato Maduna

Responding to the question of who bears responsibility for caring for the young, the old, the ill and the vulnerable – and why, Professor Elena Moore of the [Department of Sociology](#) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) delivered her inaugural lecture on Wednesday, 4 March 2026, titled: "Who Cares? The Directions of State–Family Relationships in Changing Times".

The lecture drew from more than two decades of research into how families and societies organise, experience and govern care.

Her answer, built through years of fieldwork across Ireland, South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Malawi, is that care is never merely a private choice or a moral instinct. It is a

social relation, shaped by law, policy, labour markets, history, and deeply entrenched inequalities of race, class and gender.

From Dublin courtrooms to the Gauteng High Court

Moore traced the arc of her career to a master's seminar at Trinity College Dublin, where a close reading of Ireland's 1937 Constitution, with its explicit framing of a woman's place in the home, set her on a lifelong inquiry into how states shape intimate life.

Curious whether constitutional principles actually translated into legal practice, she examined hundreds of Irish divorce judgments. Unsurprisingly, she found that women's domestic contributions were consistently undervalued.

Who looks after granny?

In recent years, Moore's work has increasingly focused on the care of older persons. She entered this field by asking what sociologists could contribute. She argued that it is a granular understanding of who actually provides elder care, under what conditions, and at what personal cost.

Moore assembled a team of 40 researchers working across 19 sites in four countries – South Africa, Botswana, Namibia and Malawi – conducting fieldwork in 11 languages, funded by a Wellcome Trust award. The project examined how elder care is experienced comparatively across rural and urban sites, and how household-level dynamics interact with broader governance structures, social protection systems and even climate change.

One of the most concrete policy contributions to emerge from this work concerns the Care Dependency Grant. This social grant is designed for older persons who regularly need assistance, yet it is largely unknown to those who qualify. Moore's team found that of 100 older persons they worked with in South Africa, only about 15 knew the grant existed, and only two had received it.

The reason was that applicants were required to navigate five government institutions for a minimum of 40 hours, at an estimated cost of between R1 000 and R1 500, while already in a state of regular need.

Working with the Western Cape Alliance for Older Persons, Moore and her team took this evidence to Parliament. As a result of that undertaking, a task team was formed, on which Moore now sits, working with the South African Social Security Agency (SASSA) to streamline the application process. "We need evidence," she said. "And then we need to fight for change; a shift in narrative, in practice, or in policy."

Building a community of scholars

From early Mellon-funded gatherings of postgraduate students to the formation of the Care of Older Persons Network spanning four countries, Moore described her career as inseparable from the people she has worked alongside.

Moore has supervised 22 honours, 10 master's, and eight PhD students to completion. She received UCT's Distinguished Teacher Award in 2022 and has served as editor-in-chief of the Political and Legal Anthropology Review. She was also invited by the African Union (AU) to lead the drafting of the AU Plan of Action on the Family in Africa and has contributed to United Nations processes on ageing and care.

The lecture ended with the question: How should responsibility for care be fairly distributed across families, states and communities – particularly in societies where profound inequality persists? “We all want good care,” she said. “But we also want just care relations.”

Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Transformation, Student Affairs and Social Responsiveness Professor Elelwani Ramugondo ended the lecture by saying, “You have invited us to reconsider something many of us take for granted. You have shown that care is not confined to the private sphere. It is shaped by law, policy, economics and history. It reflects power. It reflects inequality. And it reflects the values we choose to uphold as a society.”

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