Turning Promises into Progress:
Gender equality and rights for women and girls - lessons learnt and actions needed

Introduction

2015 represents an important moment for gender equality and women’s and girls’ rights. It is twenty years since the landmark Beijing Conference on Women and fifteen years since the ground-breaking United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 1325 on Women, Peace and Security was adopted. In light of these key milestones and as the post-2015 development framework is agreed and implemented, three UK Networks – the Gender and Development Network (GADN), Gender Action for Peace and Security (GAPS), and the Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights Network UK - have come together to assess progress and make recommendations for turning the promises made into progress.

Over the last two decades there have been many new commitments and increasing political rhetoric on gender equality and the realisation of rights for women and girls, but limited real progress in achieving either. In our report, Turning Promises into Progress, we conclude that this is, in part, because the underlying causes of gender equality have not been addressed and there was insufficient political will to make the changes needed on the ground.

Every woman and girl experiences discrimination differently, and resources should be particularly focused on those facing multiple discriminations such as on the basis of their income, sexuality, ethnic group or disability. But there are also shared realities, universal themes and common lessons. Most striking is the need to tackling the underlying barriers that perpetuate gender equality and prevent transformative change. Unequal power relations between genders are a fundamental way in which societies are organised; yet failure to recognise these social relationships has led women and girls to be labelled as a ‘vulnerable group’ to be protected. In this way, the status quo remains unchanged and discriminatory social norms and unjust social and economic structures continue to hinder progress.

Part two of the report looks at progress and challenges across eight areas relevant to gender equality: women, peace and security; violence against women and girls; sexual and reproductive health and rights; political participation and influence; education; women’s economic equality; unpaid care and social norms. While spotlighting specific issues, it is also important to underline the interconnectedness of gender inequality and recognise the underlying causes that impact across issue areas and span political, social, economic, cultural and environmental spheres. The recommendations
throughout the report are therefore inter-linked and mutually reinforcing. While the actions are intended to be relevant for all women and girls, specific attention must be given those who are the most marginalised, and who face multiple discrimination on the grounds of race, ethnicity, sexuality, age, disability and marital status. Recommendations made are aimed at the broader international community with relevance primarily to official international institutions and governments but also to civil society organisations (CSOs) and the private sector. This document is an extract from the report – the issue section on ‘Women, Peace and Security’. For the full report please visit www.gadnetwork.org/turning-promises-into-progress or www.gaps-uk.org.uk.

Part two: Section 7

7. Unpaid Care

“This [unpaid care work] is the type of work where we do not earn money but do not have free time either. Our work is not seen but we are not free as well.” Woman in Patharkot, Nepal interviewed by ActionAid

7.1 The Issues

In every country in the world, women and girls spend substantially longer than men and boys on household domestic work and care for children, the elderly and the sick. When this unpaid care is taken into account, women work longer hours than men, but earn substantially less. The time and energy associated with this work limits women’s and girl’s opportunities to access education and income earning activities and to participate in public and political life. Unpaid care work can also be arduous and emotionally stressful and impacts on the mental and physical health of the caregiver. The lack of recognition and low status ascribed to care work further reduces women’s and girls’ status in society, and restricts their political voice and decision making.

In this way, unpaid care work underpins and reinforces every aspect of gender inequality; it restricts women’s agency and autonomy, reinforces stereotypes, and acts as an obstacle to moving out of poverty for many women, girls and their families. Poor and marginalised women and girls, with limited access to public services and technology, carry the heaviest burden.

Unpaid care work (which may take place in the household or in the wider community) includes:

- Domestic work such as cooking and food preparation, cleaning, washing clothes, water and fuel collection.
- Direct care of persons including children, older persons, persons with disabilities, and able-bodied adults.
Moreover, women’s disproportionate burden of unpaid care is fundamental to the way economies operate. Unpaid care work underpins economies by maintaining the workforce, nurturing future economic actors and looking after those no longer able to care for themselves. Furthermore, this unpaid work hides and absorbs the negative impacts of cuts to public services, deregulation of labour and the exploitation of natural resources.7

<table>
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<tr>
<th>What does the Beijing Platform for Action (BPfA) Say?</th>
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<td>• Eliminate barriers to education for women with children by providing child care options.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Provide affordable support services such as child care.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Governments should research the gender impact of economic policies, including the value of women’s unpaid work.10</td>
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7.2 What's happened in the last 20 years?

Emerging consensus on the importance of unpaid care

Although a major issue for women’s rights organisations at the time, very little progress has been made since the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action highlighted the importance of tackling the unequal distribution of paid and unpaid work between men and women.11 Unpaid care has been overlooked in development and policy agendas and taken for granted or relied upon as a cost-free and unlimited means of filling gaps in public services.12 However, there are signs that this may be changing.

In recent years, the issue has finally made its way onto the international political agenda. In 2010, the High-level Plenary Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) recognised women’s unpaid care work and the need to invest in infrastructure and labour-saving technologies.13 The UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights produced her report on poverty and unpaid care in August 2013, which provided a clear framework to address unpaid care through a rights-based approach.14 In 2014, the Open Working Group on the sustainable development goals included a target on unpaid care under its proposed gender goal.15 There is also increasing awareness of the international frameworks which compel states to address the issue of unpaid care (see box below).

International Frameworks on unpaid care

UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) expressly notes that state parties must ensure “the recognition of the common responsibility of men and women in the upbringing and development of their children” (art. 5) and states that parties must take all appropriate measures to modify or abolish laws, regulations, customs and practices that discriminate against women (art. 2(f)). This includes prohibiting discrimination or dismissal on the grounds of pregnancy or maternity and ensuring that men and women have
equal opportunities to choose their profession or occupation (see Articles 11.2 and 16). Additionally states must provide “the necessary supporting social services to enable parents to combine family obligations with work responsibilities and participation in public life” (art. 11(2)(c) CEDAW).

Various international human rights treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities include binding obligations that ought to compel states to address the issue of unpaid care. This is supported by several General Comments of the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights which stress the need for positive action from states. See for example, CESC General Comment 16 in relation to the right to work and CESC General Comment 19 (para. 32) which stipulates that social security and social assistance schemes must take account of women’s unequal burden of unpaid care work.  

International Labour Organization (ILO) Conventions such as Convention No. 156 on workers with family responsibilities, Convention No. 183 on maternity protection and Convention No. 189 concerning decent work for domestic workers are also relevant.

Women continue to bear a disproportionate burden

Women continue to be disproportionately responsible for care work and, on average, spend twice as much time on household work as men and four times as much time on childcare. For girls, this division begins at an early age - a survey in 16 countries found that 10 percent of girls aged 5-14 perform household chores for 28 hours or more weekly (approximately twice the hours spent by boys), with a measurable impact on their school attendance.

The problem is particularly acute for women and girls in poor households with limited access to public services, lack of adequate infrastructure (such as energy and water and sanitation facilities), and lack of resources to pay for care services or time-saving technology. In sub-Saharan Africa, 71 percent of the burden of collecting water for households falls on women and girls, who in total spend 40 billion hours a year collecting water. The long distances women and girls have to travel to collect water and fuel also puts them at increased risk of violence. Unpaid care also entrenches inequality on class, racial and ethnic lines. For example, minority and migrant women are often the most severely affected, combining badly paid work as carers with care for their own households and limited social protection.

Over the past 20 years, increasing numbers of women have taken up paid work, but balancing this work with caring responsibilities frequently means that women are employed on a part-time or piecework basis where pay is lower and employment conditions are precarious (see Part two: Section 6 on WEE). For example, a lack of childcare has been shown to push mothers from formal into informal employment in
Botswana, Guatemala, Mexico and Vietnam. The undervaluing of care work has also led to caring professions (where many women work) being categorised as low-skilled, with corresponding low pay and low status. This lack of income further reduces savings and pensions and perpetuates women’s economic disempowerment, both in the household and in wider society.

Contrary to conventional economic thinking, women’s increased earnings in the work place have not led to a reallocation of labour within the household. Social norms run deep, and instead women have performed their paid work on top of their unremunerated tasks, or reallocated the tasks to other female members of the household. In other cases, wealthier women have employed other, often migrant, women to perform their caring responsibilities, creating global care chains.

Over the last two decades new challenges have exacerbated the problem. Environmental degradation, leading to, for example, longer journeys to collect fuel and water, further increases women’s care work. While in countries heavily affected by HIV and AIDS, women and girls provide between 70 and 90 percent of the care to people living with the disease.

7.3 Challenges and ways forward

The omission of unpaid care from the policy agenda is, in part, evidence of its profound importance. Passing responsibility for ensuring adequate provision of care to the state would require substantial increases in public expenditure, while equalising responsibility for its provision between women and men would question the core of the stereotypes that legitimise so much of gender inequality and which are defended as ‘cultural’ (see Part two: Section 8 on Social Norms). Moreover, the lack of recognition accorded to those who provide unpaid care means their voices remain unheard.

Explaining and identifying the solutions has also proved a challenge. In the past, the response has been wrongly characterised as ‘wages for housework,’ or a reduction in the levels of care provided and a limit on women’s choices. Today, the advocacy focus is primarily on recognition of the value and contribution of care work and the redistribution of responsibility for its provision.

Ultimately, the aim is to create societies in which unpaid care work is recognised and valued as a crucial social and economic good. In such a society, unpaid care work would be shared more equally between women and men. The state would have responsibility for ensuring high-quality care is accessible to all, including the poorest people in society. Sufficient investment in infrastructure and domestic technology would reduce the time burden and drudgery of care work, while improving the quality of its provision. The people who perform unpaid care work would have greater choices, opportunities, and a voice to participate in politics, the workplace, and social and cultural life.
Recognising unpaid care work

One way to recognise the value of unpaid care is to count it. As women have entered the paid workforce in growing numbers, and paid others to do the care work, it has become increasingly possible to measure the substantial monetary value of this work. It is estimated that the unpaid care economy would represent between 15 to over 50 percent of national Gross Domestic Products if it was counted in national accounts. Using another measure, unpaid care work has been calculated to be equivalent to about 182 percent of total government tax revenue in India.

Measuring and recognising women’s time poverty and actual contribution to the economy will help to improve policy making. For example, employment schemes will fail if they ignore women’s care constraints and attempts to involve women in politics will be unsuccessful if they ignore the pressures of child-care. Some advances have already been made, but more work is needed to develop time-use surveys and statistics that could measure this kind of work in order to inform policymaking. A change in society is needed so that the centrality of the provision of care is recognised and valued above the pursuit of economic growth.

Recognition is also needed of those who provide care, but are frequently excluded from economic, political and natural resource management decisions that affect their daily lives. This will include tackling the practical constraints to political participation, and building their capacity and agency to participate (see Part two: Section 4 on Political participation).

Steps must be taken to recognise the value of unpaid care work as a crucial social and economic resource, including by measuring it and counting it as a form of work. Those who provide unpaid care work should be supported, valued and treated as rights-holders.

Caring as ‘women’s work’

Discriminatory gender stereotypes related to care and work, such as casting men as breadwinners and women as carers and nurturers, are pervasive in and across every society, and continue even where women are engaged in paid work. The negative connotations associated with care as ‘women’s work’ construe women as second-class citizens whose place is in the home. Challenging these stereotypes can be met with emotional, psychological, verbal, physical and sexual VAWG.

These social norms run deep, but are not immutable. A research project by ActionAid found that change starts with women themselves, who may not recognise what contribution they make or value it fully. Collective meetings can then prove valuable both to identify priorities such as water collection or child care, and to start to change men’s attitudes. However, change will take time. A recent study found that even
where men and boys started to take on more work caring for people, they still considered household duties demeaning.\textsuperscript{44}

**Actively tackling these social norms is key to the redistribution of care work within households and society.\textsuperscript{45}** Programmes which support women’s own recognition of the value of their work as well as encouraging men and boys to provide care; education which promotes the value of care work such as in school curricula; and incentives/legislation to encourage employers to offer flexible work time and adequate family leave for men and women, can all help to redefine gendered stereotypes and ensure the care burden is more evenly shared.\textsuperscript{46}

### Governments’ responsibility to care

The role of governments in accepting responsibility for the provision of care is crucial. Neo-liberal policies, starting with donor-led structural adjustment programmes and particularly apparent in austerity measures, have relied heavily on women’s unpaid time to meet the shortfalls caused by cuts in public services and privatisation (see Part two: Section 6 on WEE).\textsuperscript{47} It is left to women to fill the caring gap and the workload of poor households intensifies while, at the same time, families have less income due to unemployment and welfare cuts.\textsuperscript{48}

Improving the accessibility and quality of public services will provide women with increased time for employment, education, and participation in social, cultural and political life as well as improving the quality of care that is provided.\textsuperscript{49} Ensuring universal provision of social protection will also reduce the demand for unpaid care, while changes to the tax system can ensure that it does not reinforce women’s unpaid care role.\textsuperscript{50}

**Governments should have a duty to ensure that high quality, affordable care is available for all children, the elderly, people with disabilities and those who are sick. Provision of these services benefits both the potential carer by reducing their time burden, and the recipient who is able to access high quality services. This requires government commitment to fully-funded, high quality, public services, and to raising sufficient resources through progressive taxation. Some families may make the choice to do some of this care themselves, but this should be a real choice, with sufficient public provision to ensure access to all.**

### Reducing the burden

The low status accorded to care work has also resulted in a lack of investment in the technology and infrastructure that could reduce the time taken to perform these tasks. Simple technology, such as grain grinders and fuel-efficient stoves, can make a major difference to women’s time burdens.\textsuperscript{51} Inadequate provision of key infrastructure such
as energy, water and sanitation facilities by governments has a disproportionate impact on poor women and girls, particularly those living in rural areas, who spend significant amounts of time collecting water and fuel such as firewood.

**Governments should ensure sufficient investment in key infrastructure provision and in affordable domestic technologies.**

### 7.4 Recommendations

International institutions/governments should:

1. Measure the extent and nature of unpaid care and recognise its essential social and economic contribution.

2. Acknowledge governments’ responsibility for the provision of high quality accessible care for all, supported by the necessary progressive revenue-raising and expenditure.

3. Work towards a change in social norms to shift responsibility for the provision of care from families to the state and from women and girls to men and boys, and to increase the value and recognition given to care work.

4. Use a care-lens in all relevant public policy making and donor programming, including taxation and expenditure, social protection and decent work.

5. Invest in appropriate labour-saving technology and infrastructure.

6. Tackle the barriers that prevent those who provide care from having a greater voice in decision making.

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9 Ibid., Strategic goal F.3
10 Ibid., Strategic goal A.4
16 Ibid.
27 Ibid.


31 Taken from Woodroffe, J. and Donald, K. (2014) Unpaid Care: A priority for the post-2015 development goals and beyond, op. cit.


39 Taken from Woodroffe, J. and Donald, K. (2014) Unpaid Care: A priority for the post-2015 development goals and beyond, op. cit.


Further explanation of all the recommendations is available in Woodroffe, J. and Donald, K. (2014) *Unpaid Care: A priority for the post-2015 development goals and beyond*, op. cit.
This is a section of the report *Turning Promises to Progress Report*, the full version is available at: www.gadnetwork.org and www.gaps-uk.org

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**Gender and Development Network (GADN)**
GADN brings together over 100 expert NGOs, consultants, academics and individuals committed to working on gender, development and women’s rights issues.

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**Gender Action for Peace and Security UK (GAPS)**
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**The UK Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights (SRHR) Network**
The UK SRHR Network brings together over fifty NGOs and academic institutions and individuals from across the UK international development sector, in order to promote the centrality of SRHR in development policies and programmes.

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