

Sharing the load

Unpaid care work and women's economic empowerment

Unpaid care work, performed mostly by women around the world, is a key piece of the empowerment puzzle: it entrenches the subordination of women in society but, at the same time, it is indispensable for economic growth and human wellbeing. Taking practical steps to recognise, reduce and redistribute unpaid care work and ensure that the views of carers are represented in policymaking is crucial to achieving women's economic empowerment, redressing gender inequality and building more inclusive and sustainable economies.

1. Introduction

Unpaid care work (see Box 1) accounts for a huge proportion of the work done every day around the world. A conservative estimate has pegged unpaid care work of all kinds at US\$10 trillion per year – roughly 13 per cent of global GDP.¹ The opportunity cost of the time spent means that women and girls' education is restricted, their ability to participate in paid work are limited and they are prevented from full participation in economic decision-making. The fact that it is largely *women and girls* who do this work also perpetuates the gendered division of labour – and thus maintains their subordinate social status and prevents women's economic empowerment.²

This kind of work is also intimately tied up with our globalised economic system. Feminist economists see this work as a crucial part of the "care economy", which sustains both the labour force and others in society and enhances the wellbeing of all, and as such it should be valued on par with the "productive economy". Unpaid care work that supports homes, families and communities is essential, and in the absence of comprehensive public services, women are relied upon to fulfil care needs.³ There is also a transnational dimension in *global care chains*, which see increasing numbers of women from the Global South finding employment in other countries as domestic workers, leaving behind a deficit in the provision of care for their own families and communities.

Unpaid care work lies at the heart of persistent gender inequality and acts as a barrier to women's economic empowerment. Failing to recognise its contribution to the economy means that policy-makers take unpaid care work for granted and, for example, make cuts to public services without considering the true impact. The point is not to reduce the overall amount of care provided to individuals and families, nor is it to

prevent women from choosing how and when to provide care; rather, our goal is to ensure that unpaid care work is more fairly shared and better supported through accessible services and investment in needed technologies and infrastructure.⁴ Public policies should position care as a social and collective responsibility and treat unpaid carers and those they care for as rights holders. This briefing makes the case that women's economic empowerment will only be achieved when unpaid care work is understood and valued, by governments and the public, as a crucial social and economic good – and a collective responsibility to be shared amongst women and men, and between families, communities and governments.

Box 1: What is unpaid care work?

Unpaid care and domestic work (which we shorten here to unpaid care work) encompasses all kinds of activities centred on caring for families, households and communities: cooking and food shopping, cleaning and laundry, collecting water and fuel, and caring for children, elders and people with disabilities as well as able-bodied adults. It also includes voluntary community work.⁵ What unpaid care work does not include is any kind of waged or salaried work, inside or outside the home, or the unpaid work that many women do for their family businesses. Performing unpaid care work is often seen as a “natural” role for women, which helps to normalise their subordinate economic, political and social position relative to men.⁶

In 2017, we find ourselves at a crucial moment for tackling the issue of unpaid care work. The barrier that unpaid care work poses to women's economic empowerment and their ability to take on paid work is starting to achieve recognition, while care needs and workloads are augmented by factors like fuel and water shortages, climate change, epidemics, migration and austerity.⁷ Changing global demographics also mean that elder care will loom larger as societies age and fertility rates decline worldwide.⁸ It is clear that unpaid care work must be at the heart of any effort to pursue women's economic empowerment – in the context of the UN High-Level Panel on Women's Economic Empowerment, the 61st Commission on the Status of Women, and beyond.

2. Unpaid care work and gender inequality

Women's overwhelming responsibility for unpaid care work is not only a major barrier to gender equality but also violates their rights to education, political participation, decent work and leisure, although the issue rarely receives the attention it merits from governments and international institutions.⁹ Ignoring unpaid care work has been called a “major failure” in governments' obligations to promote equality and non-discrimination under international human rights law – for carers, as well as many of the people who receive their care like children, elders and people with disabilities.¹⁰

Women's disproportionate burden

Women do over 75 per cent of all unpaid care work globally, with that proportion rising even higher in certain countries.¹¹ Relative to men, women spend twice as much time on housework and four times as much on childcare – and as a result, they spend as much as four hours less time per day on paid work.¹² This means that women do nearly six additional weeks of work annually, which amounts to 5.5 extra years of work over the course of five decades.¹³ UN Women calls this workload a “time burden tax” levied against women.¹⁴

The extra burden for marginalised women

Women living in poverty frequently face increased burdens of unpaid care work. They often cannot afford to hire help or buy washing machines, refrigerators, cars or other time- and labour-saving items, while those in rural or impoverished urban areas also frequently lack basic infrastructure like home electricity, piped water or adequate public transportation, leaving women workers with less time and income to meet their families' care needs.¹⁵ As urbanisation rates rise, city services are not keeping up, especially in informal settlements and poor neighbourhoods.¹⁶ Women of colour also face gender and racial segmentation in the labour market that confines them to lower pay and job insecurity, again depriving them of the means to meet basic care needs. Thus, time use data from Brazil show a greater incidence of poverty among black female-headed households than in either black male-headed households or white female-headed households.¹⁷

Box 2: Maria Sepúlveda Carmona, former UN Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights

“Across the world, millions of women still find that poverty is their reward for a lifetime spent caring, and unpaid care work provision by women and girls is still treated as an infinite, cost-free resource that fills the gaps when public services are not available or accessible. [...] Without further delay, public policies should position care as a social and collective responsibility and treat unpaid care givers and those they care for as rights holders.”¹⁸

3. Unpaid care work and women's economic empowerment

The fact that women are responsible for such a disproportionate share of unpaid care work contributes to their economic dependency and exclusion. It isolates women, limits their opportunities outside the home and reinforces the notion that women's “natural” place is in the private sphere, reducing opportunities for paid employment and participation in political and economic decision-making. This division of labour then serves to legitimate occupational segregation of women in caring professions like

childcare, nursing and eldercare – and undervalues those positions even when they are paid.¹⁹

Impact on paid work

Unpaid care workloads mean that women are often subjected to poor work conditions or excluded from work entirely. In Latin America and the Caribbean, for example, over half of women aged 20-24 cited unpaid care work as the main reason for not seeking a job outside the home, while 80 per cent of family care-givers in South Africa report income reduced because of care work.²⁰ Many women and girls experience poor working conditions, low job security and exploitation at work, particularly in informal jobs not subject to legal protection. In Bangladesh, 13 per cent of women working in informal enterprises reported unpaid work as the reason they have taken this kind of employment compared to only one per cent of men.²¹ A lack of childcare has also been shown to push mothers from formal to informal employment in Botswana, Guatemala, Mexico and Vietnam.²²

All of these factors form a vicious cycle, in which women's work is devalued and their chances are diminished, contributing to worse conditions and a persistent gender pay gap. At present, the pay gap sits at 37 per cent in China, 21 per cent in the United Kingdom and 42 per cent across 21 developing countries.²³ Women also face a "motherhood pay penalty", where 88 per cent of women aged 30-39 across 28 countries have seen their earnings decline after they had children – even as their unpaid care work burdens escalate.²⁴ Funneling women into part-time, precarious and lower-skilled work contributes to the wage gap. That said, most women in the Global South work in the informal economy as own account workers or contributing family workers. Given that their payment does not take the form of regular wages for this work, framing the problem as a gender pay gap is less relevant for the majority of poor working women and cannot be the sole lens for addressing their income inequality.²⁵

Impact on education and well-being

Unpaid care work does not begin at working age or stop with retirement; rather, it affects women and girls throughout their lives. Even as they age, many older women continue to do paid work, household chores and childcare for their extended families instead of enjoying the right to leisure and to be cared for themselves in old age.²⁶ As growing numbers of women leave the Global South to be domestic workers in rich countries, family members (usually older women and girls) left behind must cover unpaid care work responsibilities in their absence.²⁷ Time for education is also reduced. A study of 16 developing countries showed that 10 per cent of girls aged 5-14 devoted 28 hours or more each week to household chores – roughly twice that of boys – and that their school attendance declined as a result.²⁸

Research also demonstrates that unpaid care work is arduous, stressful and even dangerous, exposing carers to communicable diseases, fumes from cooking and

cleaning, injuries from physical exertion, and vulnerability to violence while fetching water or fuel.²⁹ In sub-Saharan Africa, the HIV/AIDS pandemic has forced millions of households to care for sick family members at home, resulting in adverse effects on carers' physical and mental health.³⁰ These adverse health impacts have a domino effect on women's ability to engage in paid employment or education.

Impact on economic decision-making power

Another effect of women's unpaid care work, and a crucial point for women's economic empowerment, is that women's unpaid care workloads tend to decrease their influence over economic decision-making. A 2010 study by the World Bank in Nigeria showed that women in poorer households do more unpaid care work than those in wealthier households – and that, as a result, poorer women do less paid work, bring fewer resources into the home and thus have less decision-making power than their wealthier counterparts.³¹ Similarly, in Tanzania, research demonstrates that women's decision-making power drops with the presence of a young child in the household.³² While women's gendered roles in the home may mean they have autonomy in care-related purchases – food, home items, school supplies – this does not translate to significant decision-making power on other issues such as financial investments or purchase of assets.³³ These same constraints also restrict women's ability to engage in economic decision-making at the community or national levels, and present barriers to women becoming leaders in local communities or national parliaments.

4. Policy proposals

The issue of unpaid care work is connected to virtually every facet of women's economic empowerment, and is such, it is clear that strategies aiming to empower women and improve their access to opportunities will fail if they do not account adequately for its impact on the women who perform it and its importance to healthy, functioning and productive societies. The following proposals adhere to the “four Rs” of unpaid care work: *recognise, reduce, redistribute* and *represent*.³⁴

Recognise the scope and importance of unpaid care work

The first step is to count unpaid care work, in terms of the hours spent on it and the economic value generated by it. The contribution of unpaid care work is both substantial and essential, underpinning the economy through the maintenance of the current workforce and the nurturing of future workforces, while at the same time providing services essential to society's wellbeing.³⁵ Orthodox economics recognises only paid work as *work*, but in 2013 the International Conference on Labour Statisticians agreed that unpaid care work should now be classified as work, which should lead to better measurement of productive activities.³⁶ Counted in this way, unpaid care work in India is estimated to contribute as much as 39 per cent of GDP, while in Mexico it makes up 21 per cent of GDP – more than manufacturing,

commerce, real estate, mining, construction, or transport and storage.³⁷ Time-use surveys have proven valuable tools for bringing unpaid care work into national accounts, so donors and governments should look to fund such surveys around the world to count the full extent of unpaid care work.³⁸

Secondly, unpaid care work should be factored into macroeconomic policymaking, including taxation and budgetary spending, and be accompanied by gender impact assessments. For too long, women's labour has acted as a hidden subsidy, treated as an "infinite, cost-free resource that fills the gaps when public services are not available or accessible."³⁹ As a recent UN Women briefing argued, "The fact that this labour is unpaid does not mean that it comes without costs."⁴⁰ Frequently these costs are at the expense of women's economic empowerment. Government policies on taxation, spending, borrowing and monetary policy have a pivotal role to play in determining how much care work must be provided unpaid. In China, for example, women's participation in the labour force fell from 79 to 64 per cent between 1982 and 2014, due partially to cutbacks to government-supported childcare.⁴¹ Failure to make unpaid care work visible in macroeconomic policy thus gives rise to bias, making it appear that savings were made when, in fact, costs were merely shifted.⁴² Part of the solution lies in *ex ante* gender impact assessments or gender-responsive budgeting, which take into account unpaid care work and highlight the true impact of government policies.

Reduce the workload of unpaid care work

Reducing women's time spent on unpaid care work does not mean diminishing the amount of care available; rather, it means ensuring that a high quality of care is provided to all. **By investing in technologies and infrastructure that reduce the drudgery of unpaid care work, particularly domestic work, governments can lessen women's load and free up women's time – for paid work, education, leisure and community activities.** For low-income households in particular, this means investing in labour-saving technologies that are appropriate and context-specific such as fuel-efficient stoves, grain grinders, refrigerators and washing machines. In the Democratic Republic of Congo, women using traditional stoves work up to 52 hours more per week than would be necessary with fuel-efficient stoves.⁴³ In Nicaragua, women whose homes were equipped with lighting and gas stoves were 23 per cent more likely to work outside the home.⁴⁴

Investment in infrastructure can benefit women everywhere, including safe and efficient roads and public transportation, piped water and home electricity, and access to fuel in both rural and urban areas. In discussions of women's economic empowerment, the focus is often on alleviating care that supports children, elders and adults – a crucial issue in its own right – but amongst the most time consuming activities for many women and girls is the collection of water and fuel.⁴⁵ In South Africa, women who must fetch water and fuel spend 25 per cent less time in paid work than those who do not, but investment in home electricity has been successful in freeing up

women's time, with a subsequent increase in women's employment of almost 10 per cent in five years.⁴⁶ Women in eastern Uganda found that a water source within 400 metres of their homes saved them 900 hours of work per year, while rural women in Guatemala and Pakistan saw their mobility and participation in education increase with improved roads.⁴⁷ Many women living in impoverished urban areas also spend excessive time travelling to or queuing at water sources like public standpipes, and so would benefit from infrastructural improvements.⁴⁸

Redistribute unpaid care work

Care will always remain essential to human wellbeing, but pursuing true gender equality will mean redistributing the workload – from women to men, but more importantly from individuals and families to state-funded provision. **Care provision is a public concern and must not be relegated to the private sphere; this means increasing governments' responsibility for care – and therefore increasing the fiscal space to fund it through progressive taxation.**⁴⁹ With families already time-poor and struggling economically, it is not sufficient to assume that husbands and fathers can contribute enough to fill the gaps.

High-quality public services, particularly in impoverished and disadvantaged areas, are essential to freeing up women's time while also ensuring that quality care services are sensitive to women's unpaid care workloads. For lower-income households, research has shown that reducing the cost of childcare has increased Kenyan mothers' waged employment as well as older girls' schooling, while women's employment in Brazil increased from 36 to 46 per cent with access to publically funded childcare.⁵⁰ Similar programmes could support carers for elderly and sick people; in Kagabiro, Tanzania, households with at least one family member afflicted by HIV/AIDS lost 43 per cent of their annual income to the pressing need for unpaid care work. Healthcare providers can use household and community care capacity assessments to guide hospital discharge practices and avoid undue burdens of home-based care.

Box 3: *Chile Crece Contigo*

Chile's national public childcare service, *Chile Crece Contigo* (Chile Grows with You) includes children aged 84 days to 5 years. It was launched in 2006 with the goals of crèches for all children aged 0-3 from the two poorest income quintiles and universal preschool for 4- and 5-year-olds. The number of public crèches has grown from 700 in March 2006 to more than 4,000 in 2009, while available places for children under one year has quadrupled from 14,000 in 2005 to 61,000 in 2008. Most children attend full-day programmes to accommodate working parents, and there are efforts to offer extended schedules until 7:30 pm, while staff benefit from provisions for decent working conditions.⁵¹

Together, governments and the private sector can provide workplace accommodations to support carers. In formal employment, this means parental leave for mothers and fathers, flexible working arrangements and on-site childcare. In Kenya, the SOCFINAF coffee plantations have instituted on-site crèches for children aged 3 to 6.5, including two daily meals and health care, for a cost to the employer of US\$3 per child per month. In exchange, the firm reports lower employee turnover and greater daily productivity, while working mothers appreciate the convenience, low cost and quality of the crèches.⁵² **For women in informal employment, governments should provide maternity protection through unconditional cash transfers and other social benefits.** The International Labour Organisation (ILO) argues that 800 million women – mostly informal workers – currently lack income security if they become pregnant, but that cash transfers can supplement their pay, providing needed stability and protecting them from health risks.⁵³ In Brazil, domestic workers in the informal economy have been eligible for social insurance, including maternity provisions, since 1993 with 30 per cent covered by 2007.⁵⁴ Part of the solution can also come from worker-run and -led care cooperatives that provide key services, as shown by research from the ILO.⁵⁵

There is also much that can be done to challenge discriminatory social norms that make unpaid care work “women’s work”, and to share the workload more equitably. **Community, faith and traditional leaders; governments; and private sector actors should all support increased attention to valuing unpaid care work, as well as positive portrayals of men performing care and women working outside the home.** The UN High-Level Panel on Women’s Economic Empowerment called transforming gendered norms around care an “urgent task” for governments, as these norms shape the expectation that care will be done by women – and done for free.⁵⁶ The private sector can also contribute through advertising that challenges traditional roles, such as a recent advertising campaign by Ariel in India that encourages men to participate more in unpaid care work.⁵⁷ UNESCO demonstrates how gender roles are reinforced through schooling, finding that only 21.4 per cent of characters in Togolese textbooks were women and 28 per cent in Cameroonian ones – and that these female characters were overwhelmingly associated with domestic work or shopping.⁵⁸ The Overseas Development Institute reports that 50 per cent of men surveyed across 46 countries perform no housework and spend little time on childcare, but many indicated that they would like to become more engaged.⁵⁹

Representation of unpaid carers in decision-making

Finally, governments must take action to include unpaid care workers in decision-making, both to address their needs for support and to challenge social norms around women’s participation in the public sphere. Encouraging this kind of representation means tackling the practical constraints on women’s participation like childcare and transportation to attend meetings and providing forums in which women caregivers can have a voice in programmes, processes and institutions. For example, Colombia’s cash transfer programme includes community facilitators, elected from

amongst the programme's women beneficiaries, who serve as links between the programme and target recipients.⁶⁰ Women's role in local water users' groups to manage community resources is another positive example from Gujarat, India.⁶¹

5. Recommendations

Unpaid care work is connected to virtually all aspects of women's economic empowerment – and without accounting for its impact on women's lives, meaningful and transformative change for gender equality will never be achieved. What is needed is a “care lens” across all areas of policy. Adopting such a care lens for gender-responsive budgets and fiscal policies will result in substantially better-resourced public services in care, health and education, investment in appropriate infrastructure and labour-saving technology, and social protection for formal, informal and unpaid workers alike, alongside fair representation of carers in policymaking and governance.

Governments should:

1. Include unpaid care work in national accounts and in the calculation of GDP.
2. Commission gender impact assessments of macroeconomic policies and budgets.
3. Invest in time- and labour-saving technologies in care and domestic work as appropriate for the most marginalised women in urban and rural areas.
4. Invest in gender-responsive infrastructure like public transportation, roads, home electricity and water, and well-lit public spaces.
5. Increase the provision of publically funded education, health and care services.
6. Provide comprehensive universal social protection regardless of employment status.
7. Challenge social norms that portray unpaid care work as “women's work”.
8. Include carers in economic decision-making and policy design.

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