EVERYWHERE IN THE WORLD, WOMEN SHOULDER A DISPROPORTIONATE BURDEN OF CARE AND DOMESTIC WORK, WITH LITTLE RECOGNITION OR COMPENSATION. This renders many less likely to work for income, escape poverty, accumulate savings, get an education, participate in politics, or have time for rest and self-care. Under these conditions, gender equality will not be achieved. UN Women has been at the forefront of a global call to start measuring and valuing what women do.

For most countries, a major barrier to action, besides the assumption that women should be the default providers of unpaid care, has been a perception of high cost. Extending services to provide more childcare or time-saving access to water or electricity seems like another pressure on often scarce resources. Through UN Women’s work, however, there is an emerging body of compelling evidence showing that these investments, while substantial, also bring significant returns.

A growing number of countries are turning to UN Women to perform a cost-benefit analysis of unpaid care as part of making choices about public services and economic policies. In the REPUBLIC OF NORTH MACEDONIA, the Government is committed to planning future investments in early childhood education and care services, recognizing that for years these have been inadequate and, in rural areas, unavailable. The issue had become a burning concern, taken up by gender advocates, civil society groups and academia.

A team of experts from UN Women began to crunch the numbers on the costs of expanding these services and the potential economic impacts. The study found that while there would be a large upfront investment of around 3.2 per cent of gross domestic product (GDP) annually, new jobs would be created. This would boost overall employment by 4 per cent and women’s employment by 6.2 per cent. Increased tax revenue and social security contributions would deliver a 5.8 per cent rise in GDP. The bottom line; public investment in free universal childcare would be self-funding and not require a tax hike. A typical mother of two benefiting from 11 years of free childcare would ‘repay’ the original investment after 7 and 14 years of full-time employment on average earnings.

A similar initiative in KYRGYZSTAN recently provided the country’s first evidence for scaling up government investment in early childhood education and care. It has helped policymakers understand public spending on social care infrastructure as a strategic and smart use of resources that will fuel a stronger economy and the achievement of multiple SDGs.